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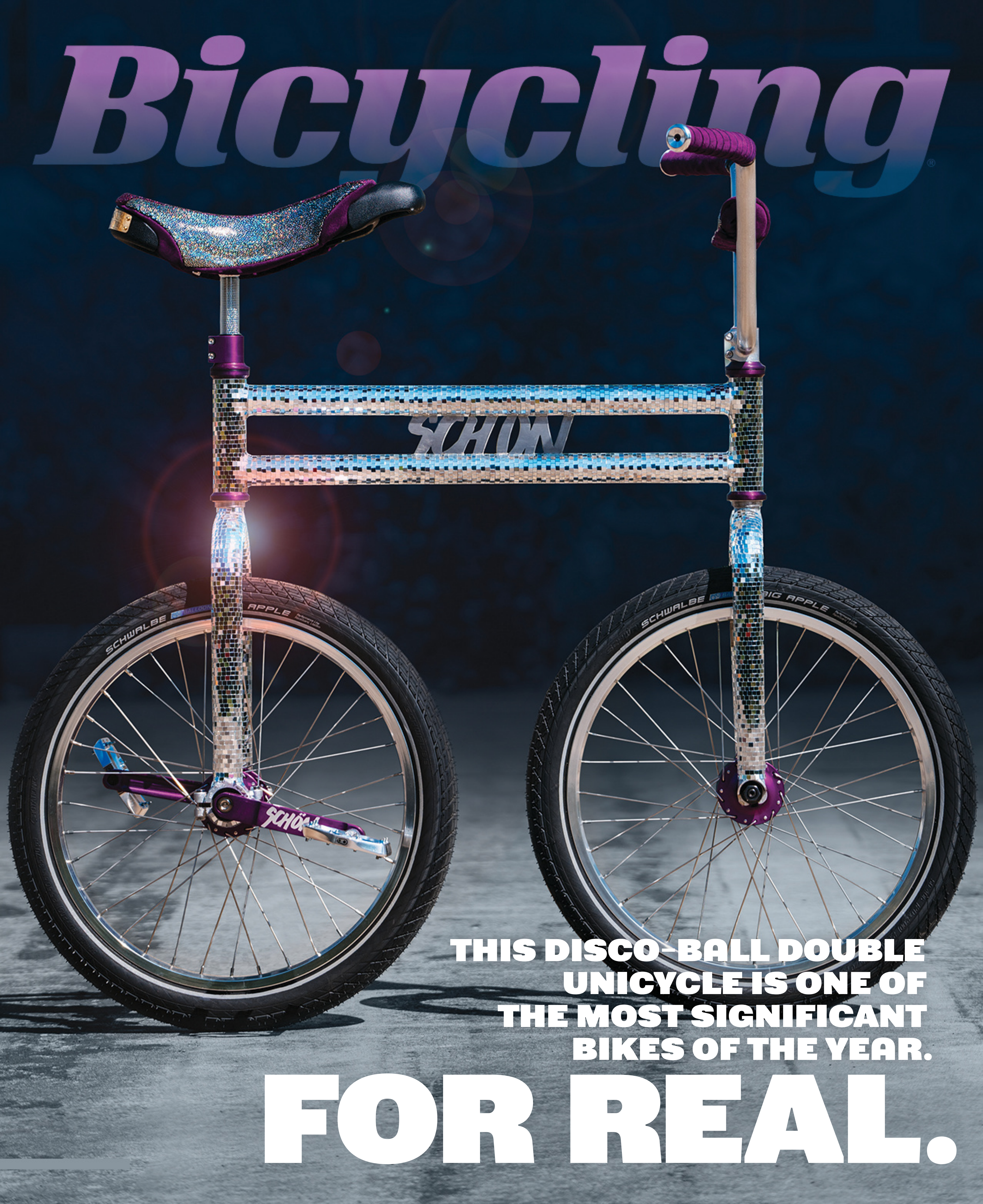
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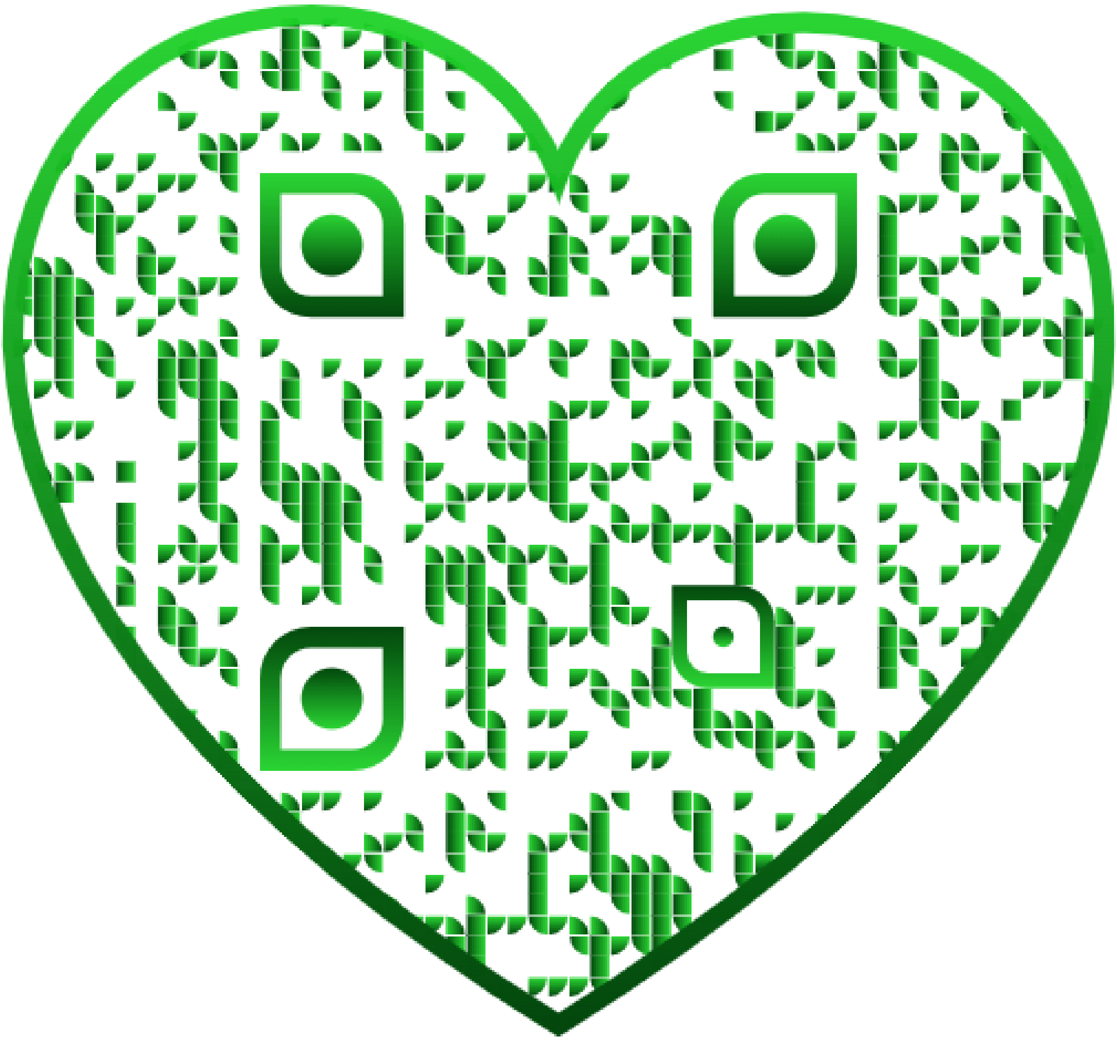

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Inside

PG.
62

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Inside

FEATURES

Bicycling
PINARELLO
EROL 1919
UNITY BANK

P.20

WHAT IT'S LIKE TO RACE YOUR FIRST CRIT

We set up a *Bicycling* member with pro-level coaching and a brand-new Pinarello F5 for her first criterium. Here's how it went. *By* Bicycling *Editors*

P.26

A HARROWING ESCAPE TO AN UNCERTAIN FUTURE

They led a cycling revolution in Afghanistan where women were forbidden to ride. Then the Taliban returned to power. *By Kim Cross*

P.38

IS THIS THE YEAR'S MOST SIGNIFICANT BIKE?

Danielle Schön's disco-ball-inspired double unicycle won the People's Choice award at the 2024 MADE bike show. *By Gloria Liu*

P.46

BIKEPACKING THE EMPIRE STATE TRAIL

Gas-station pizza, a medieval-themed hotel, canal and railroad bike paths. Experience New York's multitudes on America's longest multiuse trail network. *By Sebastian Modak*

P.62

THE SWEDISH SECRET TO CYCLING FOREVER

What you can learn from these inspiring seniors who are making the most of their time in the saddle. *By Bill Donahue*

ON THE COVER / DANIELLE SCHÖN'S CUSTOM-BUILT "DOUBLE UNICYCLE" PHOTOGRAPHED BY TREVOR RAAB AT THE 2024 MADE BIKE SHOW IN PORTLAND, OREGON.

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Inside

DISPATCHES

Clockwise: Kati Lacker, Andrew Nye, Alaina Johnson, Jamie Cullen, Greg Kletsel

P.6

THANK YOU FOR STEALING MY CAR

Having to build my life around two wheels is one of the best things that happened to me.

By Theo Kahler

P.10

WOMEN'S PRO RACING NEEDS BIG PERSONALITIES

Who are the stars that will inspire the next generation?

By Rosael Torres-Davis

P.12

SEE YA, STRAVA!

If checking your ride stats turns into mindless scrolling, you might need a break.

By Trevor Raab

P.14

A TRIBUTE TO THE KINDNESS OF STRANGERS

How getting a roadside flat helped me regain my faith in humanity.

By Pavlína Černá

P.16

WHEN DID BIKES BECOME SO COMPLICATED?

Having too many gear options to choose from does nothing but overwhelm customers.

By Matt Phillips

P.76 HOW TO BE A RIDER // with Zoe Biel, a mechanic at Sun and Air bike shop in Brooklyn.

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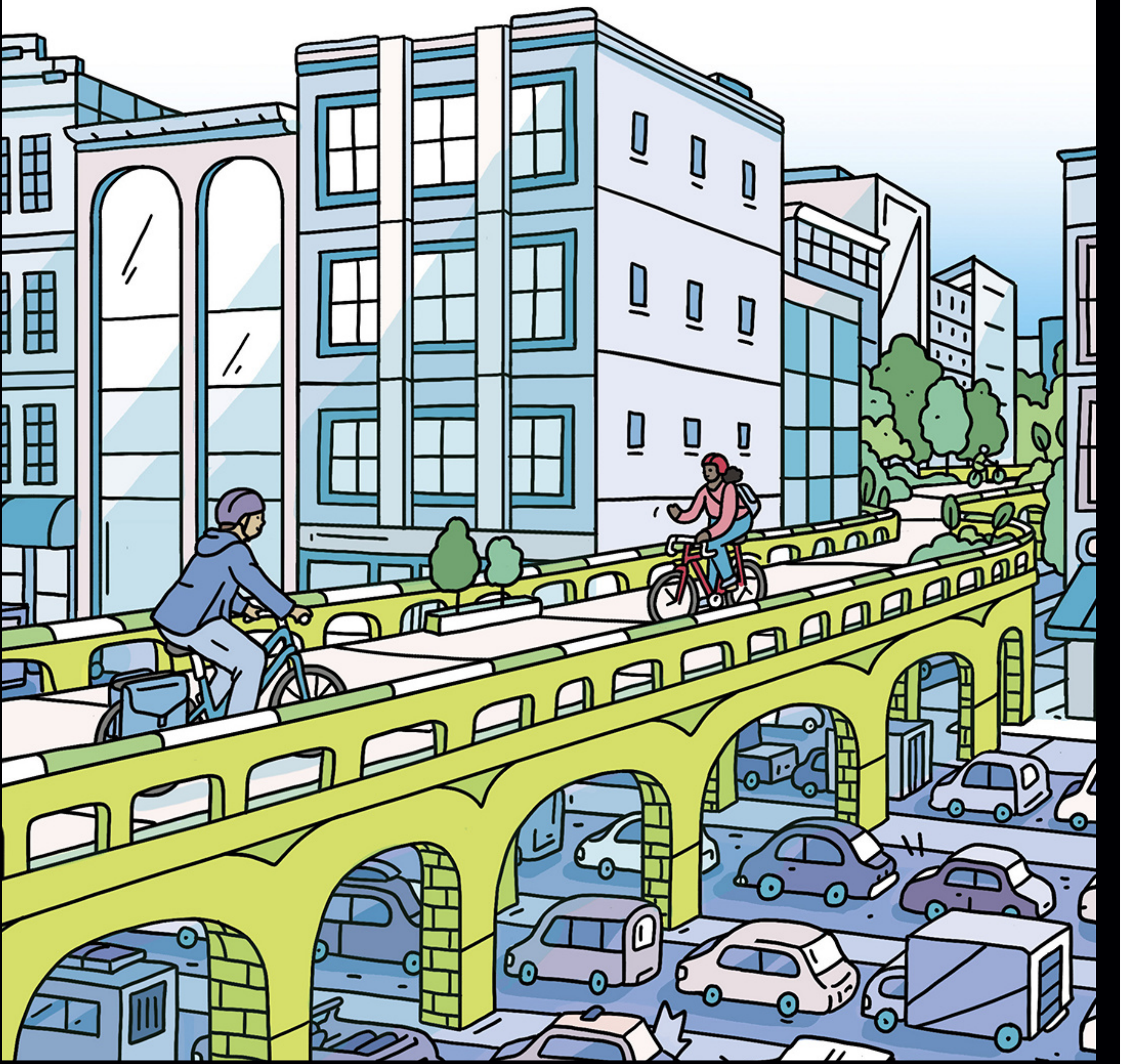

THE UPSIDE OF GETTING YOUR CAR STOLEN

By **THEO KAHLER**

AFTER I PARKED AT THE LAFAYETTE COLLEGE track for my workout, I did what I always do: I put my phone and wallet in the center console of my car and took the car key off the ring so I could fit it into the tiny pocket inside my running shorts. I headed out for a 15-minute warmup jog around the adjacent neighborhood in Forks Township, Pennsylvania. Then I took my backpack and water down to the track and knocked out some quick intervals, in prep for a mile race that weekend.

At the end, as I returned from my 10-minute cooldown jog in the neighborhood,

Trevor Raab (headshot)

Illustration by **KATI LACKER**

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BOOST YOUR TRAINING

Sport fans and spectators alike need not read any further. This is not for you. This is for those riders that truly live for the pain; those athletes that eat, drink and dream about going faster. And the first step is finding the right nutrition to support your training. Thanks to recent advances, scientists have found a legal solution that can help athletes like you crush your goals by boosting EPO production naturally.

EPO stands for Erythropoietin, a hormone that gives blood a greater capacity for carrying oxygen. Doctors first used EPO to counter red blood cell loss that resulted from chemotherapy treatment in cancer patients.

When synthetic EPO became available several decades ago, endurance athletes, especially cyclists, started using EPO to gain an advantage during training and races. The reason was simple: with more oxygen being delivered to muscles, performance and endurance improved dramatically.

In the mid-1980s, almost all of the governing bodies in sports banned EPO. Unfortunately, endurance athletes in several sports worked to get around these restrictions by using other blood doping techniques to mask EPO use.

The use of synthetic EPO has been extremely controversial. Several star endurance athletes have admitted using synthetic EPO and have faced severe consequences. The subject of EPO use has also gained significant media attention in the last 10 years.

Fortunately, there's a new legal way for cyclists to benefit from boosting EPO production. A company called Biomedical Research Laboratories has developed a natural EPO stimulator specifically for athletes seeking to gain an edge.

The product is called EPO-BOOST. Taken daily, the ingredients in EPO-BOOST help the body naturally boost circulating EPO levels. With a boost in EPO levels, more oxygen can reach working muscles resulting in dramatic improvements in athletic performance.

The science behind EPO-BOOST is equally compelling. Dr. M.T. Whitehead from the Department of Health and Human Performance at Northwestern State University conducted a 28-day double-blind placebo-controlled clinical trial to test the effectiveness of the key ingredient EPO-BOOST.

The research showed that the active ingredient in EPO-BOOST increased EPO production by over 90% compared to the group taking the placebo. The supplement group showed significant improvements in athletic performance as measured by VO2max and running economy.

EPO-BOOST is not a miracle pill and it won't make you a world champion overnight. In fact, most users will see that it takes 3-4 weeks to obtain the full performance benefits of EPO-BOOST. Athletes who use EPO-BOOST are sharing their results.

Pablo Santa Cruz, a category one cyclist, stated, "I am very skeptical with nutritional supplements due to the prevalent lack of clean manufacturing practices and banned substance contamination. I am very glad to have researched and tested EPO-BOOST to my and my performance support team's satisfaction. Particularly, I am very encouraged with breaking through key power and speed thresholds after 6 weeks of using these products."

Mr. Cruz is not alone in his praise of the product. Travis Beam, a top cyclist from North Carolina, used EPO-BOOST in his preparation for his season. Travis stated, "starting the season I made several goals to accomplish in my racing career. To achieve those goals, I knew I needed something extra to support my training. After a month of using EPO-BOOST I started seeing crazy gains in my endurance and power during training and my speed picked up to the next level! I am a firm believer in these products and cannot wait to see how these gains will help my performance in events later this year."

So EPO-BOOST provides a total solution for athletes in all sports looking for improved energy, endurance, and recovery. EPO-BOOST is legal for competition. All ingredients in EPO-BOOST are in compliance with WADA, UCI, IOC, and NCAA rules.

A company spokesman confirmed an exclusive offer for Bicycling readers. If you order this month, you'll receive $10 off your first order by using promo code "**Bike10**" at checkout. You can order EPO-BOOST today at EPOBOOST.com or by calling 1-800-780-4331.

IT TOOK SOME TIME TO ORIENT MY LIFE AROUND BEING CAR-FREE—I STILL TAKE UBERS OR BORROW MY GIRLFRIEND'S CAR AT TIMES—BUT IT'S BEEN SURPRISINGLY LIBERATING IN MANY WAYS.

something felt off. My bag was gone. No worries, I thought. Someone had probably taken it to lost and found. But wait—I forgot to put the car key in my shorts on my cooldown. I left it in the bag! I walked to the locker rooms on the other side of the soccer and lacrosse fields. Nothing. As I exited, I looked across the grass. Where my car had stood just a minute earlier was a vacant parking space.

The car was gone.

At first, I was convinced my eyes were deceiving me. Who would have stolen my bag—and my car—in broad daylight? The track is at the back of the athletic complex, not visible from the main road. The idea seemed inconceivable. I stared down the empty spot, hoping I was imagining it. Then I snapped to reality. I sprinted across the street to the rec soccer fields, where a sympathetic mom let me borrow her phone to call 911. The police came, eventually, but not before my car was long gone.

The police had no leads at first, and by one month in, I suspected they would never find it. Though I'm not a car guy, I really liked my dependable 2016 Hyundai hatchback with a Winthrop University decal. (Let me know if you spot it.) But I'm not here to dwell on the past. I'm here because, in some ways, I'm glad it got stolen.

Originally, my plan was to file away bits of my paycheck for a new ride. In the meantime, I borrowed an Aventon Level.2 commuter e-bike from the *Bicycling* office. It's powerful and shoots me up the steep hills I can't avoid in the Lehigh Valley. The torque sensor makes my pedaling smooth, and there's a thumb throttle that I hammer to get going after a stoplight. It slowly dawned on me that being car-free was feasible. There's great road riding around my small city of Easton, Pennsylvania, but I never considered riding for transit until my car was stolen.

Looking back, I realize that owning a car is a financial black hole. There are loan payments, insurance, maintenance that seemingly pops up at the most inopportune times, and, of course, gas. The financial freedom since the theft has been a welcome bonus. It took some time to orient my life around being car-free—I still take Ubers or borrow my girlfriend's car at times—but it's been surprisingly liberating in many ways.

For example, my small town has become even more familiar. Instead of doing errands within a congested 10-minute drive, I do them in a scenic 15-minute ride. I check out more local restaurants and eat less roadside fast food. I never worry about the beer garden running out of parking spots. I bike to the nearby college gym instead of drive to the Planet Fitness in the next town over. My panniers have plenty of space for workout clothes or groceries on the way home.

I've discovered hidden bike paths and new neighborhoods and learned that a lot more people in my town ride for transportation than I thought. It's comforting to become so familiar with my surroundings.

Though I have fewer options, I have fewer choices to make. There's something freeing about combating decision fatigue on two wheels. And with the money I save from not owning a car (no more street cleaning tickets!), I'm fine if the closer option is slightly more expensive. Plus, it feels good to patronize small businesses instead of always jetting off to Target for necessities.

I also don't feel pressure to ride anymore, like I would sometimes feel with my road bike. My e-bike is a utility, similar to how I wouldn't feel guilty about not driving my car. It's there when I need it and there when I don't. I think of it as a tool to enhance my everyday life—not a prerequisite for existing, like I thought my car was. Thankfully, I was able to quickly borrow one from the *Bicycling* office, but once my loan is up, I'll gladly set aside some would-be car payments and buy my own bike.

Some things, I've accepted, are just going to be inconvenient. I live on the third floor of a walk-up, so lugging up the 50-plus-pound bike is out of the question. Fortunately I have access to my basement, which is unfortunately subterranean, and the six steps down are steep and narrow. It's a pain in the ass to maneuver. But I'll take that over circling the block for a parking spot any day.

In the summer, I took a random Wednesday off work and rode 12 miles to the next town over, along the crushed gravel rail trail that links much of southeastern Pennsylvania. The ride was flat and shady, along the placid Lehigh River. When I got to Bethlehem, I locked my bike to a fence and went on a run on some trails I'd been eyeing since I moved to the area three years ago.

Afterward, I wandered downtown, stopping at a brunch spot for a black bean burrito and coffee. Then I headed back the way I came, listening to indie rock on the peaceful path, pedaling away.

The best day on a bike is better than any day in a car.

Theo Kahler has been an editor at Bicycling *since 2021. He enjoys long, shady climbs on the ridges near his home and exploring a new city via bikeshare.*

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2024 BEST PLACES TO BIKE

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PeopleForBikes' City Ratings program measures the bikeability of cities nationwide.

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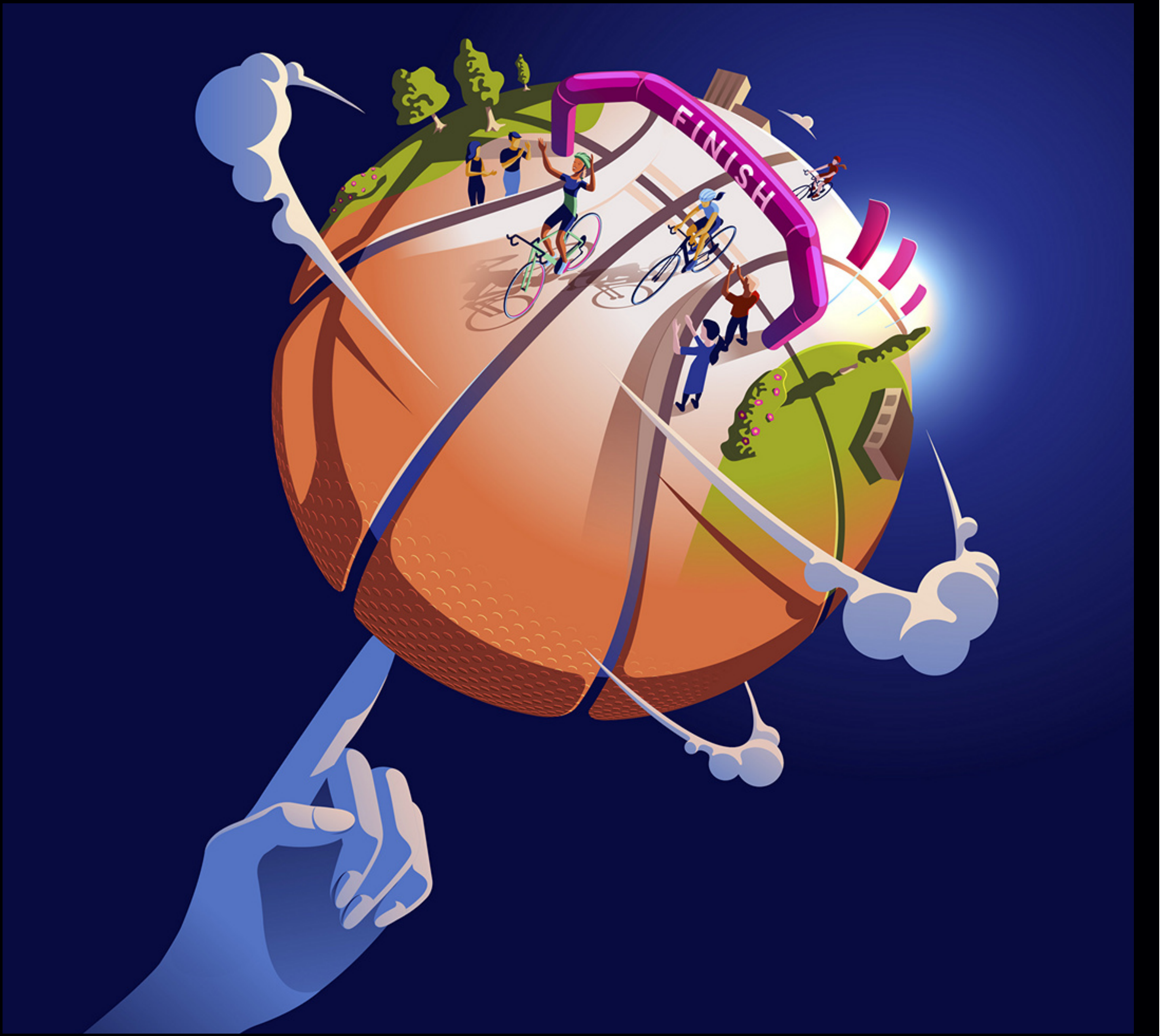
EXPLORE CITY RATINGS

By **ROSAEL TORRES-DAVIS**

LOOKING FOR CYCLING'S CAITLIN CLARK



Trevor Raab (headshot)

Illustration by **ANDREW NYE**

IT WAS 1996, AND THE MOVIE *SPACE JAM*, starring Warner Bros.' Bugs Bunny and Chicago Bulls star Michael Jordan, had just been released. But more important to me, it featured the female counterpart to Bugs, Lola Bunny, a talented and skilled basketball player in the Tune Squad. As a 9-year-old sitting on the bleachers at my brothers' basketball practices, I wondered: Why couldn't I be on the court too? After begging my mom, my sister and I joined the league as the only girls on the newly formed co-ed team.

With my long hair tied up with a colorful floral scrunchie and my bangs puffed up (a mix of styling and a result of Puerto Rican humidity), I hit the court in a lime green team T-shirt, volleyball shorts, and whatever sneakers I had at the time. That first weekday evening game, I remember feeling a little lost after the referee blew the whistle and squeaking rubber echoed off the polished concrete. But within seconds, I was running up and down the court. Every time the ball was passed to me, I had to remind myself to dribble as the coaches and parents shouted a chorus of instructions from the sidelines. After receiving one pass, I heard someone shout, "Shoot!" So, from the five o'clock position in the arch, I stretched my gangly frame just like I'd seen players do on TV and went for it... Believe it or not, I scored.

I didn't score again the rest of the game, and I didn't stick with basketball, either. Dad thought it wasn't "feminine" enough—though today, my now-enlightened father would cringe at that notion.

A year after my brief stint with basketball, the Women's National Basketball Association (WNBA) was born following the rise and popularity of NCAA women's basketball. Players like Sheryl Swoopes, Lisa Leslie, and Cynthia Cooper led the charge, carving out a space for women in professional basketball and inspiring young athletes all over the country.

But no previous generation of female basketball players gained so much popularity as the one on the courts today. The standout figures of this cohort bear the names of Angel Reese, A'ja Wilson, and Caitlin Clark, among many others, players whose electric energy and unapologetic confidence have made them a force both on and off the court. Reese, often celebrated for her boldness, has embraced her role as a cultural icon. From her viral "You can't see me" taunt to her advocacy for player empowerment, she represents a generation unafraid to challenge norms and speak out. Wilson has emerged as a central figure due to her dominance with the Las Vegas Aces as well as for her openness about mental health and her advocacy for social justice, ensuring her influence extends beyond the court. While Clark's personal style is more subdued, she isn't only about the stats; she captivates audiences with her fierce presence and bold style of play. This new generation of athletes underscores the powerful role of personality in sports, influencing the future of women's sports by embracing individuality and fearlessness.

WOMEN'S PRO CYCLING MUST FOSTER A COMMUNITY THAT WILL FEEL INVESTED IN THE SPORT FOR YEARS TO COME.

The rise of players like Reese and Wilson, and the "Caitlin Clark" effect, show a broader trend in women's sports: increased visibility. Clark's record-breaking rookie season not only boosted WNBA regular season and playoff viewership, but also led to the league's highest total attendance in 22 years. This surge in demand helped justify a $2.2 billion media rights deal, fueling league expansion into new markets like Golden State, Toronto, and Portland—further highlighting what's possible when athlete personalities are given the spotlight.

This same potential for bold personalities exists in women's cycling, too. It lives in the tension between Lotte Kopecky and Demi Vollering, whose fierce rivalry and contrasting styles ignite dynamic storytelling. It's in the energetic interviews of Cecilie Uttrup Ludwig, who rides with spirited unpredictability. It lives in Pauline Ferrand-Prévot, with her multidiscipline mastery that has earned her more World Championship titles than any man. It's in Alison Jackson, who has already broken into the influencer space through her humor and playful dance routines—and may be the best example of what I'm talking about.

However, fan support doesn't materialize overnight. As seen in women's basketball, and women's soccer before it, building long-term engagement is crucial. Visibility isn't enough—women's pro cycling must foster a community that will feel invested in the sport for years to come.

In women's cycling, there's a unique opportunity to learn from this momentum and carve out its own identity beyond marquee events like the Tour de France Femmes by embracing individuality and personal brands. Just as WNBA players use the tunnel walk to showcase their style and connect with fans beyond the court, cyclists can lean into their own identities to stand out. What's clear is that the sport needs a breakout star—someone with the charisma and boldness to make its value universally recognized. Cycling's Wilson or Clark could come from the deep pool of talent in the Women's WorldTour, but if PR teams, sponsors, and the broader media want to fully capitalize on this potential and build deeper connections with audiences, they must amplify these personalities through social media and brand partnerships.

I live for the day when the women in the pro peloton feel emboldened enough to be unapologetic during interviews, confidently expressing their opinions, personalities, and passions without fear of judgment or the need to conform to traditional expectations. Just as Lola Bunny made me believe I could trade the bleachers for the basketball court, the next wave of cycling stars could inspire young fans to leave the sidelines and own their boldness on and off the bike. While cycling may not have found its breakout personality yet, I'm certain she's out there—waiting for her moment. If the sport nurtures authenticity and allows athletes to express who they are, the next great cycling personality might surprise us all. ***B***

Bicycling*'s news editor, Rosael Torres-Davis, writes about cycling's unsung rebels and the power of authenticity. Off duty, she's plotting her next adventure—always with a little mischief in mind.*

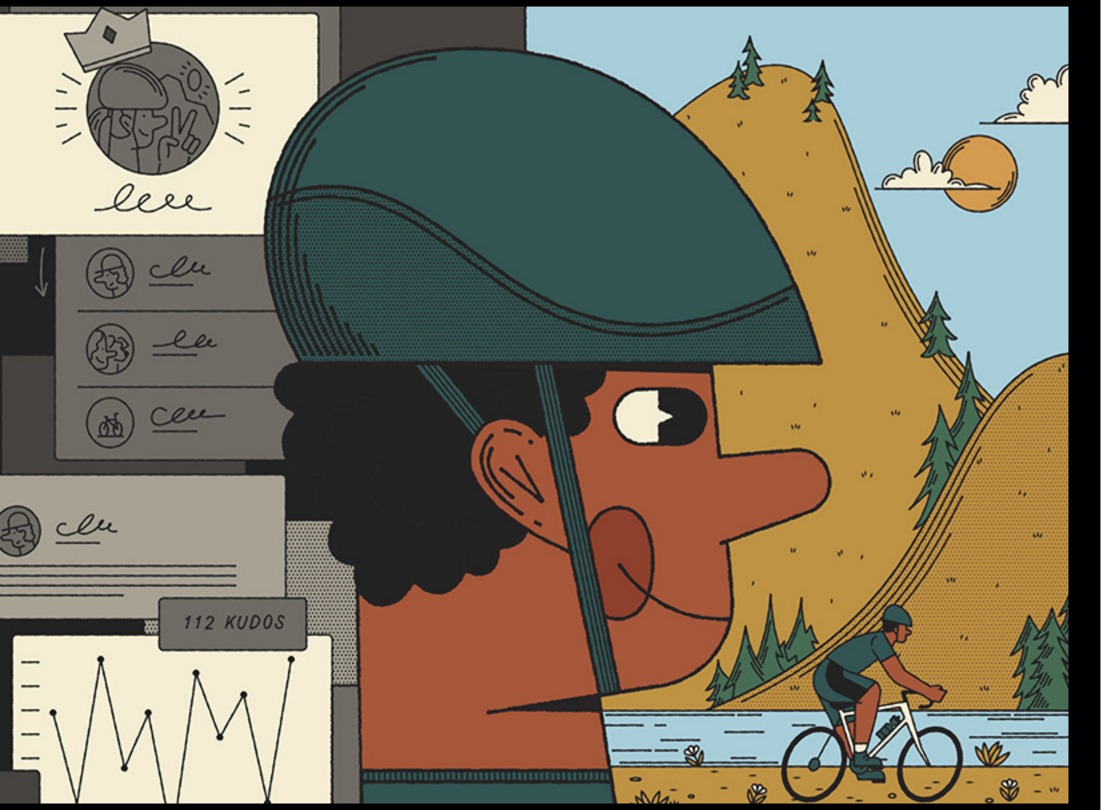
By **TREVOR RAAB**

THE CASE AGAINST STRAVA

I'LL BEGIN BY SINGING SOME PRAISES: Without Strava, I'm not sure I'd have reengaged with cycling at the level I did. Coming from just occasionally messing around on mountain bikes as a teenager to trying my best to race at an elite level, Strava has played a role in pushing me to PR, hunt KOMs, and ride faster and harder than ever before.

However, over the past few years, I've become disenchanted with social media. Platforms that once seemed good for my motivation and mental health became burdensome. Strava was no different. Postride data-checking turned into mindlessly looking at what everyone else was doing, comparing stats, and ultimately getting annoyed by ego-fluffing ride titles and novel-length explanations of "why I didn't win the race or get that KOM." I found myself hooked on those little dopamine hits that came with the handful of validating kudos and silly little comments. I started incessantly doomscrolling on Strava—I already have Instagram for that. Eventually, I began to feel disdain for the world I love so much. As a society, we have a deeper issue with social media consumption, and I really don't want cycling to be part of the problem.

That's not to say I downright hate Strava and think you shouldn't use it. All I'm proposing is that it's not a bad idea to take a break and focus on getting back to riding for yourself. But if you're still loving the social aspect of Strava, stick to it! If it's a motivator for you to keep on riding, don't let me stop the stoke.



Not using Strava doesn't mean I'm devoid of data or tracking. I use cycling computers and smartwatches to track my rides, as well as TrainingPeaks, with a coach, to plan out and analyze my efforts after a race or workout. TrainingPeaks also functions as a journal where I keep notes on how I felt through different training cycles or events.

You may still see me occasionally reappear on Strava to share a cool ride or experience. From time to time, I do utilize its incredible heat-mapping tool when building routes in new places. Plus, I enjoy having live segments show up on my computer every so often. Some of these features, isolated from the social media noise, make Strava feel more like the tool I initially learned to love. But for the most part, my account serves as a dusty old locker filled with mostly fond memories.

Strava and I will continue our limited relationship as I enjoy my rides the old-fashioned way, without the need for anyone's kudos but my own. ***B***

Bicycling*'s senior photographer, Trevor Raab, has spent the last 10 years documenting his cycling not just through photographs but also by logging plenty of data. Thanks to taking a step back and remembering the original reason he fell in love with bikes, his relationship with riding has never been stronger.*

Trevor Raab (headshot)

Illustration by **ALAINA JOHNSON**

ADVERTISEMENT

FEELING REJUVENATED

Life really does fly by. Before I knew it, my 50s had arrived, and with them came some new gifts from dear ol' Mother Nature—frequent knee pain, stress, low energy and sleeplessness. Now, I'm a realist about these things, I knew I wasn't going to be young and resilient forever. But still, with "middle-age" nearly on my doorstep, I couldn't help but feel a little disheartened. That is until I found my own secret weapon. *Another gift from Mother Nature.*

It began a few months back when I was complaining about my aches and pains to my riding buddy, Ben, who is my same age. He casually mentioned how he uses CBD oil to help with his joint pain. He said that CBD has given him more focus and clarity throughout the day and that his lingering muscle and joint discomfort no longer bothered him.

That made even this self-proclaimed skeptic take notice.

But I still had some concerns. According to one study in the Journal of the American Medical Association, 70% of CBD products didn't contain the amount of CBD stated on their labels. And, as a consumer, that's terrifying!

If I was going to do this, I needed to trust the source through and through. My two-fold research process naturally led me to Zebra CBD.

First, I did a quick online poll—*and by that, I mean I posed the CBD question on my Facebook page.* Call me old fashioned but I wanted to know if there were people whom I trusted (more than anonymous testimonials) who've had success using CBD besides my buddy. That is how I found out that Zebra CBD has a label accuracy guarantee which assures customers like me what is stated on the label is in the product.

Secondly, I wanted cold hard facts. Diving deep into the world of CBD research and clinical studies, I came across Emily Gray M.D., a physician at the University of California at San Diego (UCSD) Medical School and medical advisor for Zebra CBD who is researching the effects of CBD. Dr. Gray wrote "early results with CBD have been promising and we have a lot of research underway now. I've had several patients using CBD with good success. It's important that you know your source of CBD and how to use it properly."

After hearing it from the doctor's mouth, I returned to my online poll and was amazed by the number of close friends and family who were already on the CBD train. Apparently, I was the only one without a clue! And funny enough, a couple of friends who commented were using the same brand as my buddy—Zebra CBD. There was no consensus as to why they were using CBD, but the top reasons given were for muscle & joint discomfort, mood support, sleep support, stress and headaches, as well as supporting overall health & wellness.

Eventually, even the most skeptical of the bunch can be won over. With a trusted CBD source in mind, I decided to try it.

When I viewed Zebra CBD's selection online, I was impressed by its array of products, including CBD oils called tinctures, topicals, chewable tablets, mints and gummies. After reading on their website that all their products are made with organically-grown hemp, I ordered... and it arrived within 2 days!

The first product I tried was the rub. Now this stuff was *strong*. Immediately after rubbing it on my knee, the soothing effects kicked in. It had that familiar menthol cooling effect, which I personally find very relieving. And the best part is, after two weeks of using it, my knee pain no longer affected my daily mobility.

The Zebra Gummies, on the other hand, had a different but equally positive effect on my body. To take it, the instructions suggest chewing thoroughly. This was simple enough, and the taste was, well, *lemony*. After about 15 minutes, a sense of calm came over my body. It's hard to describe exactly; it's definitely not a "high" feeling. It's more like an overall sense of relaxation—a chill factor. Needless to say, I've really enjoyed the gummies.

While it hasn't been a catch-all fix to every one of my health issues, it has eased the level and frequency of my aches. And it sure doesn't seem like a coincidence how much calmer and more focused I am.

All-in-all, CBD is one of those things that you have to try for yourself. Although I was skeptical at first, I can say that I'm now a Zebra CBD fan and that I highly recommend their products. My 40s are looking up!

Also, I managed to speak with a company spokesperson willing to provide an exclusive offer to Bicycling readers. If you order this month, you'll receive $10 off your first order by using promo code "**Bike10**" at checkout. Plus, the company offers a 100% No-Hassle, Money-Back Guarantee. You can try it yourself and order Zebra CBD at ZebraCBD.com/Bike or at 1-888-762-2699.

Illustration by **GREG KLETSEL**

By **PAVLÍNA ČERNÁ**

GETTING A FLAT CAN MAKE YOUR RIDE BETTER

ON A BEAUTIFUL LATE-SUMMER RIDE UNDER a cerulean blue sky, I got my second flat in three days.

As luck would have it, I was 20 miles from my Eastern Pennsylvania home with no repair kit. What made me even more upset was that the ride was going so well: For the first time in weeks, my legs were not aching as soon as I woke up, because I had finally allowed myself to take a few rest days after overdoing my half-marathon training.

As I started pushing my bike along the shoulderless road toward the closest town, I couldn't shake the thought that I had jinxed my bike by recently boasting about never getting a flat before. Well deserved. A couple of cyclists coming from the opposite direction crossed the road to ask if I was okay. They were sorry they didn't have a spare tube—as if my not having one was somehow their fault. I began contemplating whether I could convince an Uber driver to take not only my sweaty self but also my bike rather than bother any of my friends to pick me up.

Then a guy in a team jersey pulled over in front of me, snapping me out of further deliberations. "A flat?" he asked, more so stating the obvious, before directing me to a patch of grass past the ditch. Stubborn in my incurable insistence not to accept help from people I know—let alone strangers—I stumbled over a series of unconvincing excuses for why I didn't need saving: I could probably find a bike shop in the next town or get someone to pick me up.

But the stranger had the flat tire pulled off before I finished the sentence. He was on a charity ride, he said, ahead of other riders, so he welcomed the stop. Like a soundtrack incompatible with his well-rehearsed motions, I rambled about my previous flat, a slow leak that took me 45 minutes to fix, and how I must have not done a good job. He asked about my accent. I told him I was originally from the Czech Republic. While inspecting my tire, he pricked his finger on a tiny splinter. Stupid me, I scolded myself internally, that's what I must have missed. "I'm so sorry about that," I apologized out loud, looking anywhere but at the blood. But he just sucked on his fingertip without losing momentum, focused on recalling the Czech town his ancestors had come from in the early 1900s. The pronunciation of his guess didn't sound like any place I know, but our shared roots got us to a first-name basis and turned the stranger into Alan all the same.

A man in a car coming from the opposite direction pulled over, blocking traffic without a care in the world, and asked if we needed anything. "A better pump," Alan answered. "Mine is crap." The man didn't have one but said he could drive 10 minutes down the road to his son's place; as an avid cyclist, he'd have one. I thanked him, saying I could get the pressure topped off in the bike shop, which I had by then confirmed did exist in the town ahead (while staring into my phone instead of at Alan's finger). The man said to look for his son, Greg, anyway, just by the bridge ahead. Again, as an avid cyclist, he'd surely help.

By then Alan was putting the wheel back onto the bike. He refused my attempts to Venmo him for the tube or at least prepay for his next coffee and flipped the bike right-side up. After "here you go," "it's nothing," and "have a nice ride," Alan jumped back onto his bike and was gone as quickly as he'd appeared. I pedaled slowly toward the nearby bike shop—because of the low pressure in my tire as much as the mist in my eyes from how touched I was by his kindness.

If I thought my ride had been going well up until then, getting the flat actually made it better. Maybe—I hope—there are many Alans among cyclists; this being my first flat out in the world, I'm still new to this. On that warm, breezy afternoon, my signature distrust of strangers was dismantled by innate goodness: People genuinely want to help, if only I'd let them. It reminded me of Kathrine Switzer, the first woman officially registered to run the Boston Marathon. She said to go out and watch a marathon if you're losing faith in human nature. While I wouldn't wish it on anyone, nevertheless, I'd add: Try getting a flat on the side of the road. ***B***

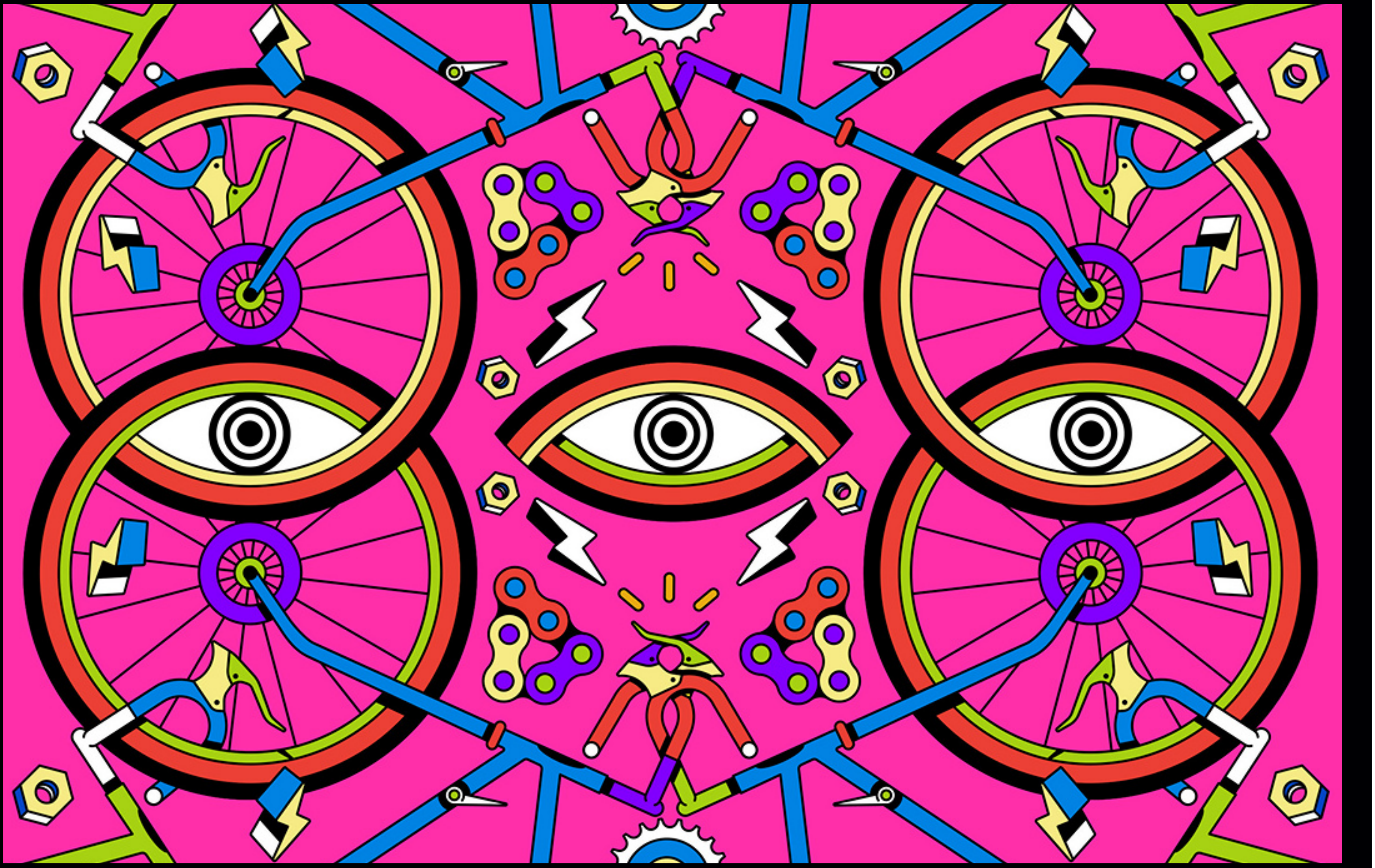
Pavlína Černá, Bicycling*'s senior features editor, often blames her hyper-independence on her Czech roots, though she knows it's unfair to her unexpressive but helpful compatriots (also avid cyclists), who would offer their aid, should she need it. Never again will she leave the house without a spare tube, if only to pay it forward.*

MY SIGNATURE DISTRUST OF STRANGERS WAS DISMANTLED BY INNATE GOODNESS: PEOPLE GENUINELY WANT TO HELP.

Thomas Hengge (headshot)

PURPOSE > BEFORE > QUANTITY

THERE ARE WAY TOO MANY BIKES TO CHOOSE FROM



By **MATT PHILLIPS**

“PERFECTION IS ACHIEVED, NOT WHEN there is nothing more to add, but when there is nothing left to take away.”

In recent months, engineers from two different cycling brands have referenced this quote during our discussions about new products. It comes from Antoine de Saint-Exupéry’s *Airman’s Odyssey*, though he is best known as the author of *The Little Prince*. (Saint-Exupéry, however, seems to be riffing on the Latin phrase *entia non sunt multiplicanda praeter necessitatem*, or “entities should not be multiplied beyond necessity.” This is a tidy encapsulation of the most famous work of William of Ockham: Occam’s razor.)

Like an earworm, Saint-Exupéry’s quote is stuck in my head. As I ride bikes and think about cycling equipment, it keeps rising to the fore. Ironically, both engineers used this

Trevor Raab (headshot)

Illustration by **JAMIE CULLEN**

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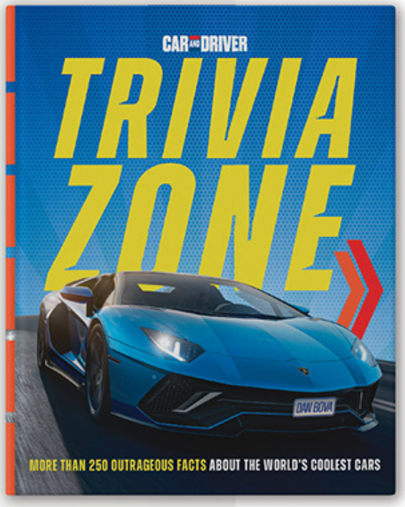
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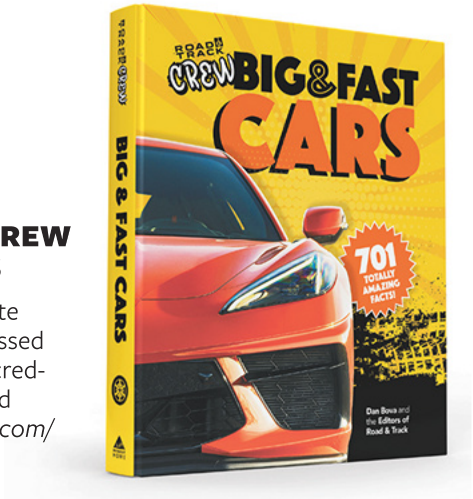
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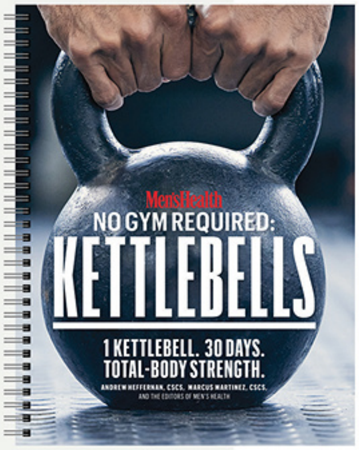
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28-DAY BELLY FAT BURNER WORKOUT

Blast belly fat and chisel your abs at the same time with this ultimate plan from Men's Health! *menshealth.com/bellyburner* quote to describe the underpinning philosophy of incredibly complex products: One was electronically controlled wireless suspension, the other a carbon full-suspension mountain bike.

Bicycles are simple: two wheels connected inline by a frame. From there, we've modified, evolved, tweaked, tuned—always adding more and more. So much has been added, in fact, that the market is now flooded with an overwhelming amount of equipment, technologies, and features. There is so much out there with so much overlap that browsing a bike shop or shopping online is an exercise of sensory assault.

I can find examples in any corner of cycling, but I'm going to use gravel bikes and equipment to highlight my complaints. Gravel is the "newest" cycling category (hilarious because the first bicycles were gravel bikes). These are drop-bar (though not exclusively) bikes primarily intended for use on nonpaved road surfaces.

Let's look at Specialized's gravel bike line. It consists of three families: the Crux, the Diverge, and the Diverge STR. (That's leaving out the e-bikes.) The Crux is the most basic: round tubes, external routing, no odd standards, no proprietary anything. The Diverge's standout feature is Specialized's FutureShock rider-suspending system in the head tube. The Diverge STR has rider-suspending systems at the front and rear of the bike.

These three distinct bike families are all designed for gravel riding but, supposedly, serve the needs of different kinds of gravel riders. And each of those families has multiple builds and in some cases are offered in two different frame materials. On the Specialized site, as I write this, there are 33 different gravel bikes, each offered in multiple sizes and most in multiple colors (although some are previous-year-model holdovers).

Even though Specialized has so many different gravel bikes, I see an obvious hole in its gravel portfolio that I'm sure it will fill soon: a race bike with aerodynamic features like Trek's Checkmate and Canyon's Grail. I hope Specialized addresses this by updating its Crux model. However, the bike industry seemingly prefers to fix shortcomings by addition, so I fear Specialized will plug the hole by adding a fourth gravel model.

If asked about the many different gravel bikes, I presume Specialized would say it "listens to the riders" and was inspired by how it observes cyclists using its equipment. And I suspect it makes products it believes will sell.

But by selling so many bikes, does Specialized offer solutions or just add complexity that results in confusion for the rider? And let's not forget that Specialized is but one brand: The total number of gravel bikes available from brands big and small is boggling. The bicycle comparison website, 99Spokes, lists, as I write this, about 7,800 gravel bikes (not including e-bikes) in its database.

IT SEEMS THE BICYCLE INDUSTRY, AS MUCH as it likes to shout out Saint-Exupéry and his Occam's razor–inspired statement, agrees more with William of Ockham's nemesis, Walter Chatton. Chatton rejected Occam's philosophy of simplicity and instead pitched his anti-razor: "If three things are not enough to verify an affirmative proposition about things, a fourth must be added and so on."

I understand that the basic tenets of capitalism are the rules of supply and demand; market competition forces the inferior to "innovate or die" (to use Specialized's slogan) and allows the cream to rise. But when so many similar products flood the zone, I'd argue that chances increase of a buyer making an incorrect choice or finding themselves frustrated because they feel talked into features they don't want. Or had no choice but to accept more bike than they need.

I have a role in this. It's my job to review equipment and provide criticism and insight which, presumably, helps riders make a more informed choice. But with so many gravel bikes on the market, I can't ride and review them all. It would be challenging for me just to ride and comprehensively review all of Specialized's gravel options before it makes significant revisions to the line. And I don't think there are enough cycling test editors on the planet to review all the gravel bikes available today.

I'm wise enough to know that some players welcome an information vacuum. It's easier to sell a substandard bike to a rider who doesn't know how a bike performs compared to the competition and what alternatives exist. But I believe the greater risk is buyers' revolt: They get so overwhelmed by all the bikes that seem so alike, they'll stick with what they know for fear of making the wrong choice. Or they recognize that piling on features they can't or won't use isn't the same as providing a bike that offers performance and functionality.

So far, I've stuck to bikes, but there are endless cases in other gravel-oriented product categories: Panaracer's 2024 GravelKing tire line consists of 17 different tires—each of which comes in several different widths and, in some cases, two diameters. POC's website returns 27 results tagged "gravel helmet." These are just two examples from one brand each (for the record, I don't know what a gravel helmet is). Zoom out to the entire industry's product offerings and the numbers increase exponentially. There are also gravel shoes, apparel, and, somehow, saddles. And this is just one small niche of cycling. I believe the world doesn't need all this gravel-specific gear.

HERE'S WHAT I KNOW ABOUT HUMANS: We each have our own special interests. Consumerism has taught us to expect that not just our needs but also our desires are met down to a cellular level. At least some of the reason Specialized offers 33 different gravel bikes is its fear that if it doesn't make a bike that's W, X, and Y and also a bike that's X, Y, and Z —largely similar but minutely different—customers will buy from the brand that does. So, I blame us as much as I blame them.

I'm not advocating that we all ride the same gravel bike and tire or wear the same helmet. I welcome choice and diversity when there is a purposeful distinction. But a purposeful distinction doesn't come from coloring something matte khaki and calling it gravel. It doesn't come from slicing a slice into more and thinner slices. Those actions only create confusion and waste, and cyclists don't like those things.

I say the following with no expectation that anything will change, but I say it nevertheless: We all need to embrace the beauty and perfection of cycling's simplicity. ***B***

Matt Phillips is Bicycling*'s senior test editor. And has been forever. He loves to ride and wrench on bikes and always strives to learn more about them. But he is most fascinated by how riders interact with and perceive the bike they're riding and how those things drive what riders desire from their equipment.*

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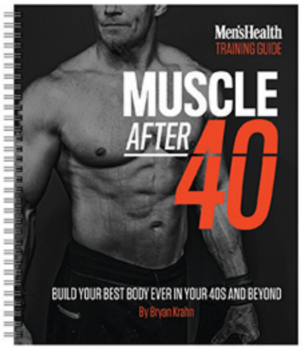
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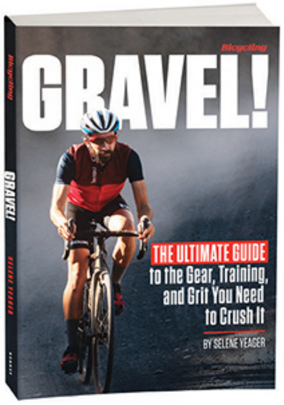
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COUNTDOWN TO YOUR FIRST CRIT

ONE INTREPID MEMBER, ONE WORLD-CLASS COACH, ONE INCREDIBLE BIKE—THE OPPORTUNITY OF A LIFETIME.

BY *BICYCLING* EDITORS

YASMIN BOAKYE HAD JUST FINISHED THE 2024 Mid South Gravel race in Stillwater, Oklahoma, when she heard about a unique opportunity with *Bicycling*.

With three years of gravel and triathlon experience, the 33-year-old Baltimore resident was fired up and looking for a new challenge. We were offering an exclusive chance for a *Bicycling* member to train with us for our hometown race, the Easton Twilight Criterium. Each Memorial Day weekend, the race attracts the best riders in the country to Pennsylvania's Lehigh Valley. The course is a short, technical, and relatively flat 0.71-mile circuit with six turns. Thousands of spectators line the route, and many watch from the city's downtown bars and restaurants.

Signing up for any race, especially if it's your first time, can feel intimidating. But with the right preparation, training, and gear, racing your bike can be a rewarding chance to challenge yourself. That's why Boakye didn't hesitate to submit an application. And when she found out she'd been selected, she couldn't wait to get started. "Getting to train in a really focused way was very exciting to me," she says. "I figured I can figure out the racing part."

We set her up with one-on-one access to *Bicycling* editors who ensured she had everything she needed for success, including a personal coach—21-time national champion and Pan American gold medalist Daniel Holloway—who designed an 8-week individualized crit training plan for her to follow.

Legendary Italian bike manufacturer Pinarello donated a brand-new $6,000 Pinarello F5 105 Di2 to ensure Boakye had the right bike and the best riding experience while training and racing.

With her coach, *Bicycling* staff support, and new road bike, Boakye was more than ready to take on her first criterium. Here is how it went—and why she would do it again in a heartbeat.

Photography by **TREVOR RAAB**

5 BIG TRAINING REVELATIONS

Holloway and Boakye checked in online weekly for the duration of the training, followed by an in-person meeting prior to the race. Here are some things Boakye focused on during her training and what she learned about herself in the process:

HOW TO RIDE IN A TIGHT PACK ▶▶ Group dynamics and riding in tight packs have always been a struggle for Boakye. "Coming from triathlon, where we can't draft, I've never been super smart about conserving energy and knew this would be important in a course as challenging as Easton."

Riding in a pack takes practice. Holloway advised Boakye to focus on staying close enough to the wheel in front of her to benefit from the draft, but not so close that she would feel the need to rely on her brakes to slow down. And avoid fixating on that wheel; keep your eyes scanning "6 feet, 8 feet, 12 feet [ahead so you have] time to process and make a really good decision," Holloway says.

HOW TO GET OUT OF HER COMFORT ZONE ▶▶ Training for the crit made Boakye a more self-assured long-distance athlete, despite the style of race being very different than what she was accustomed to in triathlon and gravel riding.

"What I discovered is that [they all] require you to push deep outside of your comfort zone. So even though there's not much crossover in terms of training zones or intensity, I had to learn how to push myself to get past the next barrier of fear—whether to chase a break or ride solo for 100 miles, it's all the same mental conversation of seeing how deep you can go."

HOW TO MANAGE ANXIETY ▶▶ Boakye had nightmares leading up to the crit about being instantly dropped by the pack because she wouldn't be able to clip into her pedals fast enough.

"I was especially worried about this because Easton starts on a slight incline and goes into a corner," she says.

Holloway assured her: "You don't get anxious at a red light when it goes green, right? You're just watching the green light." When it came to clipping in, he reminded her that she'd done it a million times before. "Press off, coast for a second, find your pedal, and clip in." The advice helped her stay calm at the start and, in fact, she had no issues on race day.

HOW TO TACKLE AN UNFAMILIAR COURSE ▶▶ The day before the race, Holloway and Boakye walked the circuit so Boakye could get familiar with its unique characteristics: things like parking meters, trees, buildings, and bumps on the road. That way she could visualize the course and anticipate obstacles.

"Even though the barriers weren't up on Thursday, we were able to look for any road hazards, places where the corners would be obviously difficult or tight, and it helped to ease my mind," Boakye says.

WHY TO PRIORITIZE REST ▶▶ As a triathlete, Boakye was used to multiple training sessions a day, but Holloway encouraged true rest leading up to hard workouts, which helped increase her performance. "One of the most surprising benefits was seeing the impact it had on my bike fitness. While I still struggle with some of the strategies of racing, I'm now able to keep up with faster group riders."

4 RACE-DAY TIPS FOR CRUSHING A CRIT

WARM UP ▶▶ It's crucial to warm up before you hit the start so your legs are ready to go as soon as the gun goes off. Holloway suggested a 30-minute warmup like this one to prime the muscles for the hard efforts to come:

10 min. recovery pace
10 min. endurance pace
3 min. at 100+ rpm in zone 3
90 sec. at 100+ rpm in zone 4
30 sec. at 100+ rpm in zone 5
5 min. recovery pace

EAT RIGHT AND HYDRATE ▶▶ Before lining up to race, make sure you have something to eat and drink. "A gel about five minutes before the start works well for most riders, but you have to find your own timing," Holloway says. Beware of eating sugary foods too far out from the start, as this could lead to a spike and then a drop in blood sugar, which could mess with your energy levels.

GET ORGANIZED ▶▶ "The more rehearsed your routine is, the smoother it goes on race day," says Holloway. "Organized equipment will help avoid scrambling to look for a bottle or gel at the last minute. And allow time for a final trip to the bathroom, to put on gloves, or to check tire pressure."

MONITOR YOUR EFFORT ▶▶ Pacing your efforts during a crit and optimally managing your energy and strength is something that comes with practice and experience, says Holloway.

"In a crit, there is no real pacing strategy," he explains. "You can monitor your efforts by cornering efficiently, using momentum, and following the rhythm of the race to know when best to expend energy correctly to either attack or position yourself for the finish."

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3 KEY CRIT SKILLS

The simplicity of crit's format belies the technical finesse this style of road racing requires. These are the three skills Boakye worked hardest on:

SPRINTING ▶▶ As a triathlete, Boakye had never done much sprinting. While reviewing her history, Holloway noticed that she'd never ridden above Zone 3 (tempo), with an average heart rate at 84 to 94 percent of her functional threshold power, the average number of watts she could sustain for an hour. In comparison, a sprint is an all-out effort in Zone 7 while being in the drops and out of the saddle, involving the upper body. To help build her top-end speed, Holloway added some all-out efforts to Boakye's training several times a week.

"It took a while to understand the mechanics behind putting that much power into the pedals all at once," Boakye says. "As a person who naturally has a lower cadence, the idea of starting at a higher gear, staying in the drops, and pushing high RPMs was both terrifying and thrilling. But in a wide open space, it became incredibly fun to practice."

CORNERING ▶▶ Knowing that the course required navigating a downhill grade into a corner—at high speed—Boakye made it a point to practice this skill.

Cornering, as Holloway explains, is all about carrying momentum rather than hitting brakes in the middle of the corner and losing traction. It's important to brake early and look past the turn rather than focusing on the apex.

"On race day, I was surprised by how comfortable I felt on the corners, despite seeing a crash in the men's 4/5 right before my race," says Boakye. "I knew from Holloway where the better lines were. It wasn't easy, but I stayed upright and enjoyed myself. I also felt good that I had the power to close an early gap and ended up joining a small group that tried to work together as long as we could."

CADENCE ▶▶ Before she started working with Holloway, Boakye thought of cadence drills as something to do to mix things up. But she soon learned that this skill, which refers to the rate at which you're turning over the pedals measured in revolutions per minute (rpm), helps boost efficiency and improve pedal stroke. Holloway included cadence drills in the training plan at least once each week.

"Now I understand the importance of being able to work in a wide range of cadences," Boakye says. "That has been a really impactful piece of training."

2 BEST THINGS ABOUT THE PINARELLO F5 (ACCORDING TO BOAKYE)

THE ELECTRONIC SHIFTING ▶▶ Before receiving the F5 from Pinarello, Boakye was riding a gravel bike with mechanical shifting.

"The [Pinarello] was so much more responsive, so much lighter, easier to handle," she says. "I had always had a hard time coming out of the big ring into the small ring, so even just the electronic shifting on the Pinarello is fabulous. I never had to worry about getting stuck in a gear."

THE LIGHT WEIGHT ▶▶ Boakye noted that the F5 felt lighter and more efficient on climbs compared with her previous bikes.

"Many people are surprised to learn that Baltimore is hilly, and it's not uncommon for an everyday 30-mile route to have 2,000-plus feet of climbing," she says. "I always thought that having more gears on my gravel bike cassette was an advantage, but I found I didn't need that range on the F5. It's been fun climbing confidently in the big ring."

PINARELLO
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PIRELLI P7
FULCRUM

BICYCLING'S TAKE ON THE PINARELLO F5

This unmistakable Pinarello shares a beautifully balanced handling and smooth ride quality with the brand's flagship Dogma F but at a much lower cost.

Starting at $3,900, the F5 is the least expensive model in Pinarello's F road competition lineup. Sometimes the cheapest bike from brands specializing in high-end stuff is disappointing. Not the F5. Yes, it's expensive compared with some competitors, but it has a smooth feel, is reactive, and handles well.

What struck us about the F5 is the robust feel of the chassis. The F5 feels dauntless, as if it will truck through any pothole, shrug off any crosswind, and remain judder- and shudder-free on any descent. It has quick reflexes and feels smooth and controlled. It's also surprisingly comfortable, with balanced handling. We appreciate that Pinarello employs the same aggressive fit on this bike as its top-of-the-line Dogma F.

The F5 incorporates much of Pinarello's signature swoopiness and aerodynamic tuning—even down to the crazy winglets on the fork dropouts.

Pinarello relies on its partnership with Toray Industries for carbon, using various grades of the material throughout its bikes. The F5 uses a lower grade of carbon than the Dogma F. Lower-grade carbon is typically less stiff, so more of the material is needed to hit stiffness targets, which results in a heavier frame. While the Dogma F has a claimed frame weight of 865 grams, the F5 frame is still an impressive 990 grams.—*Matt Phillips*

▶▶▶ TRAIN WITH *BICYCLING* IN 2025!

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1 REASON BOAKYE **WOULD TOTALLY DO ANOTHER CRIT**

"The race was thrilling in a way I didn't expect. The energy was electrifying, I loved the crowd support, and I'm glad I took the leap of faith. I was absolutely terrified the entire training process, because all I've ever known about crits was crashing, so getting to see my body at peak fitness and being able to hang with super strong women was a great and surprising feeling once I let go of that fear. Training for the Easton Twilight Criterium made hard things feel easy.

"I would love to race a crit again. It made me passionate about seeing more women line up for races. While Easton had a larger women's field, most of the other events I did locally this year were quite small, and I know much of that is because many women are also scared about crashing. But on the other side is a thrill and a joy that I haven't found anywhere else in the cycling scene so far. So hopefully with more clinics and more access, more women will give racing a try." ***B***

THE ALCHE

Photograph by **DJAMILA GROSSMAN**

AFGHANISTAN
CYCLING TEAM
115
BMC

They led a cycling revolution in Afghanistan where women were forbidden to ride. **When the Taliban returned to power, their only hope was a harrowing escape to an uncertain future.**

BY
KIM CROSS

MISTS

Courtesy Steve Bouey

PART I.

PIONEERS

The day before the Taliban trammeled her freedom, a young woman went for a bike ride.

She wore pants and a long-sleeved shirt under a sky blue cycling jersey. Her ponytail flew behind her like a flag, free of the hijab she usually wore tucked into her helmet. Her smile was shy but also bold, with a pop of red lipstick.

Reihana Mohammadi was 18 years old, a new member of the Afghan National Cycling Team. She lived and trained in Bamyan, a small and peaceful city in the rugged heart of Afghanistan. On this 20-mile ride, she was thinking about her next big race, three weeks away in Pakistan. She hoped to raise her country's flag in her first international victory.

Riding a team-issue mountain bike, Reihana sailed down a two-lane ribbon of road, through a desert canyon with crumbling walls. Behind her, in a valley framed by peaks, were the ancient cliffs of Bamyan. The city was known for the Bamyan Buddhas, two statues carved into a cliff.

Created in the 6th century, these statues were older than Islam. One Buddha, regarded as male, was 18 stories tall and named Salsal, which means: Light shines through the universe. The other was smaller and older. Her name was Shahmama. Queen Mother.

Salsal and Shahmama had witnessed the rise and fall of one civilization after another. A Buddhist holy site. A Silk Road trading post. A Muslim city of 70,000 with a spirit of peace and progress. These Buddhas had watched over Bamyan for 1,500 years.

Now, in their place, were two voids.

In March 2001, the Taliban denounced the statues as "idols" and "gods of the infidels." Militants from the Islamic fundamentalist group fired at the Buddhas with tanks and artillery. When that failed to fully destroy them, they used explosives, cheering as the statues crumbled in a cloud of dust and smoke.

Visible on every ride in Bamyan, the Buddha-voids echoed with absence, a constant reminder of what had been lost.

Pedaling out of the city, Reihana felt a mounting gravity. The air was still and heavy with dust. Such weather made the old women whisper: *Something bad is going to happen!* Locals were gathering in the streets, shoving parcels into trucks.

As Reihana rode past, some glanced up and noticed: A young woman pedaling a bicycle through the desert.

“You are crazy!” they cried in Dari, the native tongue. “The Taliban are very close!”

It was August 14, 2021. On TV screens across the world, maps of Afghanistan showed districts falling to the Taliban as the U.S. withdrew troops that had occupied the country since 2001. The center of the country was a bull’s-eye of freedom, and in that oasis was Bamyan. An island of peace in a sea of war, shrinking in the rising tide.

Outside Reihana’s central province, great cities were under siege—two dozen capitals had fallen in a matter of days. Diplomas and buildings were burning. Stray bullets were landing in children.

“They will kill you!” people on the roadside shouted. “Don’t go on!”

Reihana pedaled harder.

Her older sister, Zakia, had fought for this. This was a right that only a decade before did not exist in Afghanistan, one of the last countries in the world where women were forbidden to ride a bicycle. Born in 1993, Zakia Mohammadi was a teenager when she risked her life to challenge this cultural taboo. Her success was so public that death threats drove her out of her country in 2019; she has lived in Germany ever since.

Zakia’s absence created a vacuum that inspired the next generation. Reihana was one of its stars. The sisters were everything the Taliban hated: Hazaras, an ethnic minority persecuted by the Taliban. Shi’a Muslims, sworn enemies of the Sunni Taliban. Educated women with minds of their own. Women who used bicycles to emancipate other women. They embodied the freedoms women had won in the 20 years since the Taliban were suppressed.

The Taliban considered the sisters—and all female athletes—as infidels who violated the Quran, because the clothes they wore to engage in sports allowed men to see the shape of their bodies.

Reihana rode through waves of dust and dread, training her mind on the coming race instead of the nearing Taliban. Her drive to compete won out over fear. She finished the ride and went home to the house she shared with her parents; older brother, James; and little sister, Hania. She fell asleep in her room, surrounded by trophies, medals, and ribbons.

The next morning, her uncle called with a warning: The Taliban were coming.

“Take nothing—just run,” her uncle said. “If they find you, they will kill you!”

Reihana darted around her room, filling her arms with papers that identified her as an athlete. In the backyard, she lit them on fire and watched her identity burn. Years of dreams and victories vanished in a plume of smoke.

Her father gathered documents while her mother packed water and snacks. They would drive four hours to Kabul, where they could stay with family and try to catch a flight out of the country. Some of their treasured possessions—bicycles, snowboards, trophies—would identify them as infidels and put their lives in danger. Reihana’s heart ached to leave her bike. Would she ever see it again? There wasn’t much time to wonder.

Taking nothing more than a backpack apiece, the family of five piled into the car and sped through the gates of Bamyan, past trucks full of Talib soldiers streaming in. Fighters dusty from battle rode in pairs on motorbikes, the passengers carrying rocket-propelled grenades slung over their shoulders.

In the backseat, Reihana hid her red lips behind a wisp of white scarf. Through the window, she scanned her city for any sign of resistance. Where were the Afghan soldiers? Where were the police?

As they drove past the police station, she saw that the Afghan flag, with its stripes of black and red and green, no longer flew over the building. In its place was the black-and-white Taliban flag.

It is over, she thought. It is finished.

Twenty years of rights and dreams and freedoms began to crumble.

◀ ZAKIA MOHAMMADI AND SHANNON GALPIN LEAD TEAM SHAHMAMA ON A TRAINING RIDE IN BAMYAN IN 2015.

■ ■ ■

THE FIRST RIDES / Zakia Mohammadi was born on the fourth of July in Iran. Her mother, then 16, was the daughter of Afghan refugees who had fled the rise of the Taliban in the 1990s. Her father, born in Afghanistan, had also grown up in Iran. Zakia, their first, was eight weeks early, so small and quiet that her mother said, “She didn’t even know how to cry.”

When Zakia was 5, her father gave her a little red bike and taught her how to ride. She burned laps around the family’s yard, but her parents didn’t think it was safe for a girl to ride in public. It wasn’t illegal in Iran. But it was unusual. A bit taboo. Some believed a bicycle seat could threaten a woman’s chastity.

In Iran, the family enjoyed luxuries they didn’t have in Afghanistan: good roads, nice schools that girls could attend, better infrastructure and order. Life in Iran was safer and, in many ways, easier. But people there yelled, “Afghani, why are you here? Go back to your own country!” That wasn’t freedom.

On September 11, 2001, al-Qaeda operatives hijacked commercial jets and turned them into weapons. The world watched twin towers collapse in Manhattan in a cloud of dust and smoke. A month later, U.S.-led international troops landed in Afghanistan—where the Taliban had provided sanctuary to al-Qaeda—to wage war on the terrorist group and its leader, Osama bin Laden. By late 2001 the Taliban were in retreat.

In 2003, Zakia’s parents felt it was safe to move back home to Afghanistan. Zakia was 10. By then she had a little brother named James, and a baby sister who cried a lot: Reihana.

Their father opened a bike shop in Bamyan. As a boy he’d played soccer and trained in kung fu. As a young adult he fell in love with downhill skiing. He didn’t yet view cycling as a sport. It was a cheap, fast, and reliable mode of transportation. For men.

Nine years later, Zakia was walking in Bamyan one day when she noticed something shocking: A young woman on a bike. Not training. Just getting from here to there. As if this were perfectly normal. Zakia flagged her down. That’s how Zakia met Zahra.

Zahra Hussaini had a fierce intensity that burned in dark, intelligent eyes framed by dark-rimmed glasses. She was 19, but she carried herself like someone much older. A college student, she’d started biking as a faster, easier way to get to class and work.

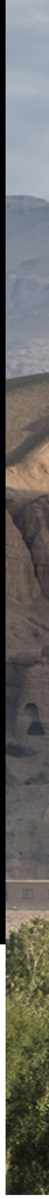
Most parents in Afghanistan never would have allowed this. But Zahra was an orphan. The youngest of three daughters, she’d been born in Iran to refugees who had left Afghanistan in the 1990s to get away from the Taliban. Zahra was 40 days old when her mother died. At age 2, she lost her father. Her older sister raised her unconventionally, cutting her hair short and encouraging her to enjoy the same freedoms as boys.

To earn money, the sisters wove carpets. Six-year-old Zahra begged to go to school. They made a deal: If Zahra wove so many rows a day, she was allowed. She thrived in and outside the classroom, a “playful and stubborn child” who loved playing soccer and sprinting through neighborhood alleys with local girls and boys.

One of the things the boys enjoyed most was riding bicycles. Zahra was 8 or 9 when she decided to teach herself. She borrowed an adult-

▲ ZAKIA HELPS ATTACH REIHANA'S BIB BEFORE THE WOMEN'S ROAD CHAMPIONSHIPS OF AFGHANISTAN IN 2022. THE EVENT WAS HELD IN AIGLE, SWITZERLAND, BECAUSE OF THE TALIBAN'S RETURN TO POWER.

▶ THE LARGER OF THE TWO VOIDS LEFT AFTER THE TALIBAN DESTROYED THE BAMYAN BUDDHAS IN 2001.



sized bicycle and stretched to reach the pedals. She crashed a lot and scraped herself up and made her sisters worry.

"It seems my stubbornness helped me finally learn to ride it," Zahra says.

When Zahra was 13, she and her sisters moved to Afghanistan. At 18, she moved to Bamyan, where she got a job producing radio shows on women's rights and freedom of expression. She also worked for Habiba Sarābi, the first female governor of Bamyan, taking minutes in meetings with male officials. She enrolled at Bamyan University to study archaeology. On her 40-minute walk to class, she noticed boys zipping past her on bikes. What took her hours on foot took them minutes on wheels. It didn't seem fair.

So Zahra got a bicycle.

She had never seen a woman riding a bike in Afghanistan. It was 2012—11 years after the Taliban had been driven into hiding by international troops. Some elders remembered Afghan women riding bicycles back in the '60s, but hard evidence of that had been destroyed. The stories, however, endured.

After that first meeting in the streets of Bamyan, Zakia and Zahra forged a unique friendship. Zahra was more of a tomboy and an activist: fiercely outspoken, a scholar, a confident leader. Zakia, a natural athlete, was softer spoken and sweet-faced, with earnest eyes and a peacemaker's strength. They shared a love for speed.

"We like to go fast," Zakia says.

Other girls saw them and wanted to learn. Zakia and Zahra began teaching them. Soon, 10 girls were sharing one bike. Zakia's father donated two more from his shop. Most of the roads in Bamyan were unpaved or riddled with potholes, so they practiced near the governor's house, where the road was nice and smooth.

They weren't racing, then. There was no team or club. They were simply girls teaching other girls a skill that expanded their world. Cycling was a way to go farther and faster, to school or a job or the market.

"Our wish was to go to and from places as we pleased," Zahra says. "To have our own freedom."

Riding made them feel "happy and scared," Zahra says. Happy because freedom is joyful. Scared because of the fury their riding provoked in men. Boys hurled rocks. Old men sneered and yelled.

The mullahs—educated religious leaders—preached that what they were doing was wrong. Sinful. Obscene. A local mosque posted signs: Beware! Do not let your girls join this group.

"The men, when they saw us, they thought it was shameful," Zakia says. No bitterness in her voice. Just facts. "They decided it's not good for us, because we are Muslim."

They kept riding.

* * *

THE FIRST RACE / Some of the boys in Bamyan saw Zakia and Zahra, and instead of throwing stones, decided to join them. Soon girls and boys were riding together through Bamyan's streets.

In 2013, the group heard about a ride that went from Kabul to Panjshir Province, about 75 miles northeast. Most of the girls stayed in Bamyan, but Zakia and Zahra decided to go. Zakia's mother worried, because the road passed through a conservative town that didn't like Hazaras. But Zakia reassured her: They'd be riding with boys from Bamyan, including

Photograph by **DJAMILA GROSSMAN**

Getty Images

Zakia's younger brother.

The day of the ride was rainy and cold. Most of the riders wore ski masks, which covered their hair and faces. Zahra was usually fearless, but this day was an exception. "To tell you the truth, I was scared," she says. Not of the ride, the risk of a crash, or getting harassed. She feared what it would mean if they failed.

"I was afraid that if Zakia or I got injured, it would affirm what others said about how girls shouldn't be riding bikes," she recalls. "I didn't want to give them any evidence to support this."

The Bamyan boys supported the girls like domestiques, taking turns pulling and drafting. Zakia and Zahra finished the ride feeling confident and empowered. Instead of being heckled, they were given medals and celebrated as the only two female riders.

A few months later, Zakia and Zahra entered their first race, a road event in Bamyan. It was another cold day, and Zakia and Zahra pulled on their ski masks. They wheeled their mountain bikes—the only bikes they had—to the start.

As the race began, their knobby tires hummed on the asphalt as they jockeyed for position. None of their competitors knew they were racing against girls.

Zakia pulled ahead of the boys, feeling the rush and joy of speed, a bird uncaged in the wind. She crossed the finish line, caught her breath, and slowly peeled off her mask. When everyone saw her flushed face, they gasped.

A girl had raced—*and won?!*

On a mountain bike. An old one.

* * *

THE FIRST TEAM / In Bamyan, the community's mind began to change when Zakia and Zahra started winning races. Girls begged their parents to let them learn how to ride, and some of their parents obliged. Men and boys started yelling good things at them for a change. Afghan men cheering Afghan women in sports was itself a revolution.

The mullahs were still outraged. They called the girls sinners and infidels. In every Afghan community, this council of elders holds a great deal of power; if anyone wants to do anything, it's important to get their blessing.

When the mullahs heckled the girls in the streets, Zakia and Zahra stopped and tried to talk to them. It wasn't the riding that bothered the mullahs. It was how they were riding—so brazen and proud, out in the open for all to see. In other sports, women competed in gendered courts or gyms walled off from men's view. But cyclists trained in public, on roads.

> The sisters embodied **the freedoms women had won** in the 20 years since the Taliban were suppressed.

It was also what they were wearing. Without a skirt or tunic, the shape of their bodies was visible. Even though they wore long sleeves and pants, the suggestion of a womanly silhouette might elicit sinful thoughts in men.

Zakia and Zahra explained that cycling wasn't just a sport. It was a vehicle for "the freedom of travel." Many girls had to walk two hours to get to school. If they could ride instead, maybe more girls could get an education. If women could ride to work, they could have access to more jobs.

The mullahs nodded and conceded a little. It took many conversations, but eventually the mullahs grudgingly backed off. They never actually came out in support, but they finally stopped bringing it up.

Zakia and Zahra made T-shirts with their own slogan: *Haq Barai Radan*. Right to Ride.

In 2013, a year after they met, Zakia and Zahra founded a cycling club and team for girls and boys. Zahra, the archaeology student, came up with the name: Salsal & Shahmama. She also organized "A Night with Buddha," an evening of cultural events to honor the legacy of the Buddhas. The statues no longer stood, but what they stood for did.

After hearing about Zakia and Zahra, an American woman came to Bamyan to meet them. A tall, blond, blue-eyed cyclist from Colorado, Shannon Galpin had traveled for years in Afghanistan. As a foreigner she was treated like an "honorary man," allowed to travel alone, ride a bike, and talk as an equal with men.

Zakia and Zahra took Shannon on a ride through Bamyan, where locals stared and waved. They rode laps around fields, raced each other through the streets, and braked to a stop in front of the Buddha cliffs. A group of young smiling boys crowded around them, and a few girls crouched nearby. Zahra nodded at the kids and turned to Shannon.

"Girls deserve to have the same opportunities as boys," Zahra told Shannon, "whether that's education, or the right to ride a bike."

Shannon saw that Zakia and Zahra's bikes were old and janky. Two months later, she returned to Bamyan with eight new mountain bikes—for Zakia, Zahra, and six other girls.

They were part of a shipment of 65 bicycles donated by Liv Cycling for the Afghan National Team, a separate initiative Shannon was helping develop in Kabul. Founded and managed by men, this team was different from the Salsal & Shahmama club in Bamyan, a grassroots movement led by teenage girls.

Shannon tried to introduce the two groups, but it didn't go well. The male coach of the national team was dismissive. Zakia and Zahra didn't need "help" from some man to do what they were already doing on their own. So the two teams developed independently from each other. Shannon helped them both.

On August 8, 2014, Zakia and Zahra helped organize the Tour de Bamyan, the first coed cycling race in Afghanistan. In concert with nonprofit groups in Bamyan, they planned the event and mapped a course. They enlisted men and boys as officials, course marshals, and cheerleaders, making them allies in the process. Zakia's father and brother were two of the Tour's biggest supporters. "We wanted to make it an annual event," Zahra says, "to demonstrate the equality and freedom in Bamyan, which could be a model for other cities."

A year later, Reihana entered the Tour de Bamyan. Her first race. Feeling shy but also bold, she pushed herself through 20 kilometers of nerves and pain and glory. When she pedaled across the finish line—not first, but not last—she tasted victory.

During the podium ceremony, the riders gathered at a small cafe in front of the Buddha caves. Zahra called the crowd to attention and waved Reihana over.

"She's the youngest participant and the youngest member of her team," Zahra said as Reihana, who was 12, blushed and smiled. "She did well today. I am proud of her."

Six years later, on her dusty training ride in August 2021, Reihana tried to focus on her upcoming race in Pakistan instead of the encroaching Taliban. She felt anxious, unsure what the future held. But she never imagined this would be her final ride in Afghanistan.

Reihana was the daughter of a bike shop owner, heir to her sister's legacy. Cycling was her birthright. It was the bedrock of her dreams: to race in the Tour de France Femmes, to compete in the Olympic Games, or maybe one day wear the rainbow stripes of a world champion.

After driving to Kabul, Reihana and her family, including James and Hania, locked themselves in the home of a relative. The house had a small yard with trees, and through them Reihana could see the stars. The Quran says Allah created the stars to help people navigate the depths of darkness. Reihana gazed up at them now, seeking comfort.

If she stayed, she would lose her freedom. The Taliban would forbid her to play sports, have a job, or go anywhere without a man. But if she left, she would lose her home and the life she loved. Either way, her dreams and freedoms would crumble.

My dreams, my achievements, my medals, she thought. Everything destroyed in one day.

Zakia, in Germany, reached out to Shannon Galpin.

PART II.

REFUGEES

In Scotland, Shannon's phone was exploding with messages from Afghan girls and women.

Please help us!

She was living in Edinburgh, raising a teenage daughter as a single mom. Through years of work as an activist, Shannon knew how far Afghan women's rights had come in two decades. Now she was watching it all unravel.

All across Afghanistan, female athletes were deleting social media accounts, burning photographs and certificates, digging holes to bury their trophies and medals. Destroying the evidence. Erasing their identities.

Their lives were in real danger. Nooria Tabesh, a member of the national handball team, had been gunned down in her home in April. Cyclists were at heightened risk because of the very nature of cycling.

"It's the one sport that is intrinsically tied to women's rights," Shannon says. "It represents independent mobility."

Shannon had zero experience with evacuations. But during eight years of work in Afghanistan, she had been smuggled in the trunk of a car down mine-riddled roads where the Taliban had burned police checkpoints. She had felt the blast of a suicide bomb shatter the windows of her guesthouse in Kabul. She wrote a list of people in "imminent danger," adding Reihana and her family.

Such lists were forming all over the world. Created by governments, nonprofit groups, athletic federations, and individuals, evacuation lists were culled into flight manifests that served in place of plane tickets. In the desperation of triage, the lists were constantly changing.

▲ REIHANA MOHAMMADI DURING HER LAST RIDE IN BAMYAN ON AUGUST 14, 2021.

Courtesy Reihana Mohammadi

As a member of the national team, outspoken and successful, Reihana was on many lists. But what about her little sister, brother, and parents? They had to leave together if they wanted to stay together.

Shannon had them on a U.S. State Department list, but they weren't on a flight manifest—yet. She told them to be patient, to stay in hiding until they were called to board. The airport in Kabul was convulsing with panicked crowds. People were clinging to the bellies of jets accelerating down the runway. Bodies fell from the sky.

Reihana and her family couldn't wait. Blocks from the airport, they found the streets choked by rivers of people and trucks filled with Taliban soldiers. So they ditched their car and were swept into the confluence. When they found the airport gate locked, the people amassed like water behind a dam.

Even if Reihana and her family could find a way through, they didn't have a flight to board. They returned to the car, went back into hiding, and prepared to try again. Day after day, they tried and failed.

The crowds at the airport were impenetrable. Planes were taking flight with empty seats because passengers could not reach them. Outside the gate, a young mother—also a cyclist—clutched her little girl to her chest as a fog of tear gas swirled around them. Her toddler screamed as her face and body began to swell. Shannon's phone lit up with her cry for help:

If not today
And I can not cross the gate
I will suicide

■ ■ ■

ZAHRA / In Kabul, the Taliban were everywhere—standing on tanks, swarming the streets, wielding Soviet-era guns, and pounding on doors to find infidels. As the capital fell, the president fled his country.

Zahra was living in Kabul with her husband. She had a high-profile job as a human rights worker and an aide to a prominent female politician.

Zahra worked to build the very things the Taliban wished to destroy.

It wasn't safe to go home, so Zahra and her husband met at a friend's house. In the living room, Zahra flipped through a stack of photos she'd brought with her. Snapshots with her husband at "A Night with Buddha." Pictures of her riding with the girls in Bamyan. Portraits of the Salsal & Shahmama team lined up in crisp white jerseys. Unable to start a fire indoors, Zahra ripped up the photographs and drowned the shreds in a bucket of water.

Zahra and her husband had to leave before they were killed. After more than 10 trips in vain to the airport, they realized their only chance was to drive to a border crossing. But all the borders were closed. Pakistan. Tajikistan. Uzbekistan. Turkmenistan. Iran. Even if the crossings had been open, Zahra and her husband couldn't cross without visas. Government offices were closed. The roads were a minefield of checkpoints.

Late one night, Zahra and her husband boarded a bus to Kandahar, more than 300 miles southwest of Kabul. The birthplace of the Taliban and Afghanistan's capital before 9/11, Kandahar was the city where, just days before, the Taliban had opened the doors of the prison to swell their ranks of insurgents.

This was dangerous Taliban country. But it was also close to a stretch of the border with Pakistan known to be "porous."

Zahra's bus was filled with colleagues from the human rights organization where she worked. Several times, the bus was stopped at Taliban checkpoints where men with guns climbed aboard and scanned the solemn faces. Seeing civilians, they let the bus pass.

Zahra and her husband spent the night in Kandahar, coordinating with smugglers who could help them cross the border into Pakistan. The next day, the border crossing in the town of Spin Boldak was churning with anxious crowds. Zahra wrapped her arms around her husband's waist so they wouldn't be forced apart.

At the checkpoint, the Pakistan border police asked for their papers. Zahra and her husband pulled out their passports, but they had no visas. Their passage was denied.

Would they have to go back to Kabul? Would the Taliban learn who they were and all the freedoms they had fought for?

Just then, for a fleeting moment, the border checkpoint was left unattended. Zahra's husband grabbed her hand. Quickly, quietly, they slipped through.

On the other side, in Pakistan, they didn't know where to go. They walked down the road for 20 minutes and encountered other Afghans gathering amid a cluster of cars.

Zahra and her husband climbed into a car with strangers and were driven to Quetta, a border town where her sister-in-law lived. They could hide out for a while. But they still weren't safe. Quetta flew the Taliban flag.

■ ■ ■

REIHANA / On August 26, Reihana and her family tried once more to reach the airport in Kabul. Again, they found themselves blocked by the crowds. They joined the masses outside Abbey Gate, the only airport gate still open.

Just before sunset, Reihana felt an explosion, a blast so loud it shook the ground and rattled the air in her chest. Babies were screaming, women were crying, and Reihana felt caught in the force of the crowd as everyone started to run.

"Don't go! There was a bomb!" people shouted. "You will die!"

The crowd turned like a tide, and its current was strong. Reihana linked arms with Hania so her little sister wouldn't be swept away. But the crush of people broke their grasp and Hania was swallowed up.

Reihana scanned the sea of people for her little sister's eyes. All she saw were unfamiliar faces, warped with terror, streaked with blood, some attached to bodies so broken they were hauled through the streets in wheelbarrows.

Reihana and her brother found the nearest door and pounded. The door opened, and they were led into a private Pashtun home. Pashtuns are one of the country's largest ethnic groups and have a history of violent oppression against Hazaras. But this Pashtun family offered them water, food, and a safe place to rest. Someone found Hania and brought her into the house. Reihana threw her arms around her little sister and wept.

The suicide bombing, claimed by ISIS, killed around 200 people, most of them Afghan civilians. Its plume of smoke rose like a warning

▲ ZAKIA, CENTER LEFT, DURING A RIDE WITH OTHER WOMEN IN 2014 IN BAMYAN.

Jenny Nichols

ADIDAS
7 Days. 6 Miles
LLENGED ATHL
GIANT
PRIMAL

flag, visible for miles.

In Germany, Zakia clung to her phone as a lifeline and to Shannon as a source of hope:

Hi dear Shannon. Please help me and my family. All people are going to get out but my family is still in danger. Please help me.

Shannon wrote back:

The gates are closed. No one can get through. I have them on convoy and a plane. I am going to get them out.

In Scotland, Shannon was sleeping two hours a night, clutching a phone that hemorrhaged cries for help. Plan after plan fell through. She had Reihana and her family on a flight manifest but needed a bus that could get them through the mob at the gate. Other buses had been circling the airport for days, unable to pass through. Thousands of Afghans cleared to leave were being left behind.

Shannon and an army of lawyers were working around the clock, across borders and time zones, to help them. Some were calling this a Digital Dunkirk, a nod to the "miracle" of World War II when hundreds of civilian boats evacuated 338,000 soldiers stranded on a beach in France.

But the window of opportunity was closing fast. Sweden, Spain, Canada, Germany, and Australia concluded their evacuation efforts. Britain stopped taking applications. The last American soldiers would depart in just four days.

On August 31, the day after the last American soldier departed, Zakia feared, like many Afghans, the evacuation was over. She texted Shannon:

I'm scared that this program will stop and my family will stay in danger with the Taliban. Please help us, you're our only hope.

Five years before, in 2016, an Italian group tried to nominate the bicycle for the Nobel Peace Prize. An inanimate object was not eligible, so they nominated the Afghan national women's team, which did not include Zahra and Zakia. To Shannon, this felt hollow. The national team

was started and run by men. The Bamyan movement was a grassroots revolution—for women, by women.

Zahra and Zakia never raced on the national team, but they paved the way for others who did. Reihana and her brother, James, were later chosen as members.

In 2019, Zakia—who was equally gifted on snow skis—was one of three Afghan women chosen for a trip to Finland and Austria to be trained as downhill instructors.

On the last night of her trip, Zakia's mother called her, sobbing.

"Please don't come back to Afghanistan."

"Why?"

"Somebody wants to kill you."

After the airport suicide bombing, Reihana and her family went on lockdown. Only her brother, James, would emerge to buy food in Kabul, dressed discreetly in shalwar kameez, traditional pants and long tunics. Some nights, the sound of gunfire echoed through the sky.

One day, Reihana's phone rang with a call from an unfamiliar number. She declined, but the stranger kept calling. Finally, she answered.

"I know who you are," a man's voice said. "I know what you did and what you are doing. I know you're still in Afghanistan."

Reihana said nothing.

"It's shameful for you to ride a bike," he said. "If I find you, I will kill you."

▲ ZAHRA HUSSAINI IN STOCKHOLM, SWEDEN, OCTOBER 2022.

Oceans and continents away, Shannon and the lawyers tried to find another way out. The challenge lay in a minefield of international laws and rules.

As Shannon and her team pulled strings in the cat's cradle of red tape, Reihana's father made a trip to Bamyan to make some final arrangements. Reihana insisted on going. She needed to see her home once more, her bicycles, and the stars.

For the journey, Reihana wore a burka for the first time in her life. It was hot and claustrophobic, but it was also a brilliant cloak of invisibility. Concealed by this blue cloth prison, her red lips curved into an ironic smile: This instrument of oppression was hiding the body of an athlete.

On October 20, Reihana and her family rose at 4:30 a.m. on their final morning in Kabul. Drivers hired by Shannon shuttled them to a meeting point, where they boarded a bus that drove them to the Pakistan border. By late morning, they reached the Torkham border crossing at Khyber Pass.

Their papers were in perfect order. Reihana, who wore a hijab on this day, handed her passport to a Pakistani border official, who asked to see her face. She pulled back the hijab like a curtain and beamed. For once, she had forgotten her red lipstick.

"Are you happy to go to Pakistan?" the official asked.

"If it's safer," she said, "yes!"

Reihana and her family walked across the border. Sixty-six days had

Photograph by **FELIX ODELL**

passed since they’d sped through the gates of Bamyan.

In Pakistan, their cell phones no longer worked. But they’d been given a code, a call-and-response, to identify the man who would transport them to a safe house.

“Red,” one of them said.

“Monkey,” came the reply.

They climbed into Red Monkey’s car.

A man whose name they would never know drove them 150 miles to Islamabad, where Shannon had arranged a safe house.

* * *

ZAHRA / Nine hundred kilometers southwest of Islamabad, Zahra and her husband were stranded in Quetta, the border town populated with Taliban. It wasn’t safe to leave the house.

Zahra had a letter from Sweden that offered an apartment in Stockholm and a two-year scholarship as a writer in residence within the International Cities of Refuge Network. If she and her husband could support themselves after two years, they could be permanent residents.

But she had to file the paperwork at a Swedish embassy—in person. The nearest embassy was in Islamabad, a 12-hour drive on roads patrolled by agents looking for Afghans without papers. Zahra wasn’t willing to risk deportation.

An international network of women, coordinated by Shannon from Scotland, coalesced to solve the problem. Through an underground network of Hazara living in Pakistan, they appealed to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. With papers proving her refugee status, Zahra couldn’t be deported. This gave her the security to make the trip to Islamabad.

At the Swedish embassy in Islamabad, Zahra sat for a photograph, rolled her fingerprints, and prepared to learn Swedish. Soon after, she learned that Reihana and her family were also in Islamabad. There wasn’t much time, but she knew she had to see them. She wanted to pay respects to Zakia and Reihana’s parents and thank them.

On a warm fall day in 2021, just days before flying to Sweden, Zahra and her husband took a taxi to the safe house where Reihana and her family were staying. Over lunch, they shared their stories of escape. In the common threads, they found comfort.

The future ahead was uncertain. The past was not even past. They didn’t know when or where or how they would see each other again. Zahra embraced Reihana one last time and said what mattered in the moment: “I’m so happy that you are safe.”

EPILOGUE

IN MARCH 2022, ZAHRA AND HER HUSBAND PRODUCED “A NIGHT WITH Buddha” at a theater in Stockholm, where they live and work as permanent residents. It was an evening of dance, poetry, and discussion honoring Salsal & Shahmama.

Zahra thinks a lot about Afghanistan, and the women who have lost their freedoms. In Sweden she is safe, but she doesn’t feel free. She hopes that sharing her story will help people see a more nuanced Afghanistan. She dreams of a day when she and other women can return and ride. It’s been more than three years. So much has changed in such a short time, but she dreams of the possibility. Dreams are the stars without which the human soul is nothing more than night.

Shannon continued evacuating Afghans for more than a year, struggling to raise money when the war in Ukraine made Afghanistan old news. Getting Reihana and her family out was just one of 155 evacuations she managed directly. She credits a constellation of individuals—almost all of them women—that transcended international borders to help other women survive.

In November 2021, Reihana and her family landed in Germany. They were taken to a house in Penzberg, a small city in Bavaria where they would begin their new life as refugees.

A van pulled up to the house. Zakia, who had not seen her family in two years, emerged with wet eyes and open arms. Reunited at last, the sisters embraced. The tears were bittersweet.

Reihana and her family live together in Bavaria. Zakia, who lives in Munich, got engaged last year. Most weekends, she comes to visit. The German law firm that helped them relocate made a 17-minute documentary film about their saga. A stranger in Switzerland, moved by the story, bought road bikes for Reihana and her brother.

Hania celebrated her 12th birthday shortly after moving to Germany. Her gift—from the German lawyer who secured their future—was a shiny new mountain bike.

Hania remembers her first race in Afghanistan, which was also her last race in Afghanistan. She was 11 years old, the littlest one. As Hania struggled up a steep hill, Reihana saw she was tired.

“Hania, it’s enough,” Reihana said. “You can stop.”

“No!” Hania shouted. “I will continue!”

Reihana no longer has the time or the heart to ride.

Now 21, she speaks the best English in her family, so she handles all the paperwork and meetings with German authorities. Her dreams of studying astronomy have been replaced by plans for a business degree. She is trying to get a good job, which is not easy for an Afghan refugee. Her brother, too, is searching for work. Her father works at a bike shop, and her mother is taking classes to learn German, math, and English.

“When I ride bikes now, I don’t feel as happy as I did in Bamyan,” she says. “It feels so different. I’m not that free.”

Reihana keeps in touch with her former teammates through texts and calls. They live scattered across seven countries. They miss riding together in Bamyan, pressing against the wind.

“We are in touch, but not like in Afghanistan,” Reihana says. “Life in foreign countries is really hard. Everybody is having mental issues. Depression.”

She misses her village, how people would wave when she pedaled by on a bicycle.

“In Afghanistan, we were so special.”

Some summer mornings, when she wakes up in her room to the first kiss of sunshine, Reihana feels a warm breeze through her window and feels like she is in Bamyan.

Then she remembers. ***B***

EDITOR’S NOTE: *A network of women worked across borders and time zones to evacuate these cyclists and many more. These include Hogan Lovells’ Pro Bono teams in three countries led by Yasmin Waljee in London, Ina Brock in Germany, and Amy Roma in Washington, D.C.; James Wilcox in the U.K.; Jalila Haider in Pakistan; Mariam Faruqi with iProbono in London; “Boots” in the U.S.; Heather Barr in Pakistan; Dr. Nida Ahmed in Colorado; Nika Kabiri in Colorado; numerous unnamed Afghan and Pakistanis who put their lives on the line; and many “invisible” volunteers whose names we’ll never know.*

Some Afghan women have been evacuated as recently as 2024. They need housing, food, and other necessities. To help support their transition as refugees, visit https://fundly.com/support-the-bamyan-women-cyclists-in-exile.

TWICE AS GOOD

TWICE AS GOOD

WHY A DISCO-BALL-INSPIRED DOUBLE UNICYCLE MIGHT BE ONE OF THE MOST SIGNIFICANT BIKES OF THE YEAR

BY GLORIA LIU

PHOTOGRAPHY BY TREVOR RAAB

Courtesy Danielle Schön

LET’S START WITH THE BICYCLE. IS THIS A BICYCLE? It has two wheels, but they’re undersized, like on a kid’s bike. It has tubes, but they’re joined bizarrely, only at right angles. It has cranks, but they turn the rear wheel directly, like a unicycle. Each wheel steers independently—the back end twists when you twist. The front end is basically another unicycle.

The fact that it wears the skin of a disco ball is actually the least weird thing about it.

The bike begins to make sense when ridden. Aptly dubbed a circus bike, it’s made for doing tricks: popping wheelies while twirling the front wheel, pedaling backward, and even jumping rope with the front end held aloft. Still, if you didn’t know better, and heard this bike won a ribbon—the People’s Choice award at the 2024 MADE bike show in Portland, Oregon—you might dismiss it as having won by virtue of shininess. You might not think this bike matters: a fringe creation from a specialized corner of a niche sport.

Dumb.

Offensive.

Fun, but frivolous.

You could think any of these things. But if you did, you would be wrong.

* * *

THIS BIKE WAS MADE IN A CRUCIBLE. TO BEGIN TO UNDERstand why, you must know who made it.

Originally from Toronto, Danielle Schön was an art school graduate who attended welding school at night while working a corporate job. When Schön was a kid, her single mother channeled her creativity into arts and crafts, particularly sewing. This was for both artistic and practical reasons: a project could absorb Danielle for hours, and her mother wanted her to be able to hem and repair her own clothing.

This emphasis on practicality followed Schön into adulthood. She quit her desk job to complete her welding and machining education and began doing metalwork for architectural and residential purposes. She learned to build a bike frame because she needed one to race on. Then, in 2014, after studying with storied Canadian builder Paul Brodie and the Colorado-based legend Koichi Yamaguchi—who taught her to hand-build frames without power tools—Schön began to build for others.

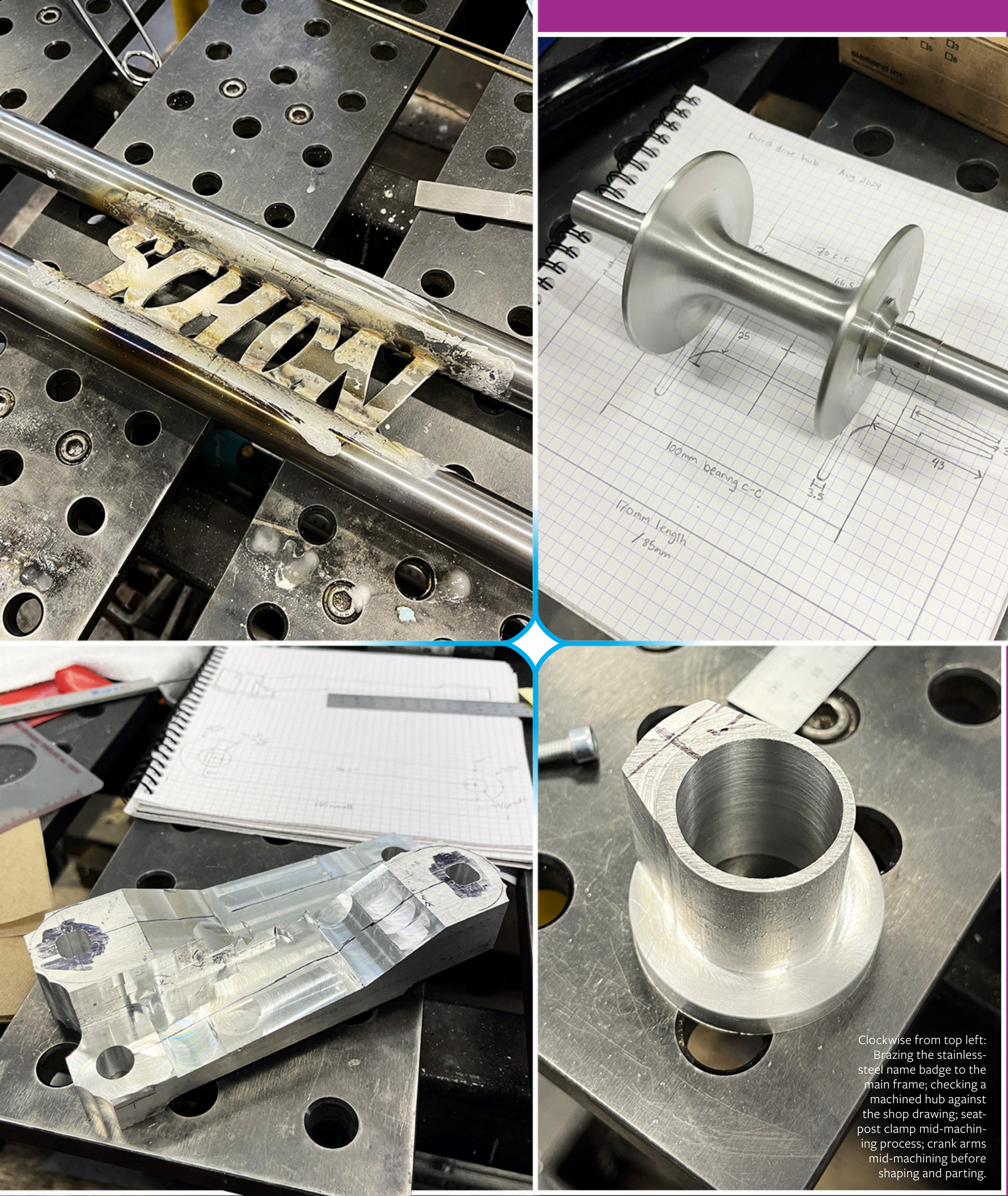
Thirty-six-year-old Schön is among a new generation of builders who are reanimating the independent framebuilding scene. In the years immediately preceding the pandemic, attendance at the community’s flagship event, the North American Handmade Bicycle Show (NAHBS), declined, and some longtime builders aged out, says Billy Sinkford, director and cofounder of MADE and former spokesperson for NAHBS. NAHBS never recovered after 2019—organizers canceled each edition thereafter, most recently citing a lack of exhibitor interest.

However, by 2023, when Sinkford and business partner Rob Reedy launched MADE—in essence replacing NAHBS—the vibe had improved. “The old guard was leaving, the new guard was coming in,” Sinkford says. Indy builders like Schön and Texas-based Nao Tomii brought fresh energy, while more-established brands like Sklar Bikes and Stinner Frameworks, both based in California, were ascending as new segment leaders.

Where handmade shows a decade ago were dominated by lugged drop-bar bikes, MADE showcased a plethora of cargo, mountain, and even small-wheeled mini-velo bikes. The crowd was more diverse, too. Longtime cycling writer John Watson of *The Radavist* lauded the welcoming atmosphere and called it “the best bike show I’ve ever been to.”

When MADE rolled out an awards program for its 2024 show, Schön saw an opportunity to get noticed by the media and industry movers.

Most framebuilders stick to building frames. Then they purchase components to finish the bikes. Holding a diploma in machining, Schön wondered, why couldn’t she make a hub herself? A seat collar? Components manufacturers generally


Direct drive hub
Aug 2024
70 c-c
66.5
25
100mm bearing c/-C
170mm length
/85mm
32
43
3.5

Clockwise from top left: Brazing the stainless-steel name badge to the main frame; checking a machined hub against the shop drawing; seatpost clamp mid-machining process; crank arms mid-machining before shaping and parting.

“I REALLY DO FEEL YOU HAVE TO BE EXCELLENT TO BE CONSIDERED COMPETENT. BUT IT’S ALSO A DOUBLE-EDGED SWORD BECAUSE YOU HAVE NO CHOICE BUT TO BECOME REALLY GOOD.”

SCHWALBE
BIG APPLE
SCHWALBE
BIG APPLE

use computer-automated manufacturing processes. But Schön knew that even makers like Paul Price of Paul Component Engineering started their careers machining parts by hand on manual lathes and mills—equipment she already had in her Squamish, British Columbia, studio. Her plan: manually machine and anodize the components, then design an eye-catching frame to showcase the parts.

That's how this double unicycle arose. It was a simple frame on which the parts wouldn't get lost, and it incorporated the most basic components (a direct drive) that were achievable for her first attempt at making parts. The mirrors would draw the crowd in; then she would reveal the real accomplishment.

"Come for the disco, stay for the machining," she quipped to me of the bike.

It worked. Schön's bike won the people's hearts by "a landslide," Sinkford says.

* * *

HISTORICALLY, LIKE THE REST OF THE BIKE INDUSTRY, the handmade scene has been very white and very male. Some builders were salty and not particularly welcoming to newcomers. Women builders who attended a handmade bicycle show for the first time often didn't return.

▼ Schön machined and anodized the bike's parts in-house. ▶ The saddle cover, custom made by Wow What Studio, is covered in holographic stingray hide and purple suede.

Schön's bike hints at changes. "I can remember bike shows where if you brought that bike, people would yell at you," says Anna Schwinn, a veteran cycling writer and product designer (she also custom-made the saddle cover for the disco bike). MADE is a more diverse show, she says. "People bring cool weird stuff. And it's not out of place."

Sinkford credits the broader range now seen at shows like MADE, Philly Bike Expo, and Europe's Bespoked in part with recent efforts from the handmade community to become more inclusive and invite new perspectives. SRAM, for example, offers scholarships to builders from underrepresented backgrounds, and MADE offers free booths to new builders. "This is a place for folks who are extra creative," he says. "We're just starting to scratch the surface."

This could have a broader impact than it appears. The hand-built scene has historically been the leading edge of design and graphic trends in cycling, with changes in the independent framebuilding industry often translating to changes in the broader bike industry. (To see the potential scale of the influence, look no further than the invention of mountain bikes, fat bikes, and gravel bikes.) Product managers from big brands like Specialized, Giant, and Trek routinely attended NAHBS, Sinkford says, snapping photos and taking notes.

"The handmade community is a place where people experiment, where new trends are born, where fashion originates," Schwinn says.

Following the media coverage of MADE this year, Schwinn tells me she saw a distinctly artistic flair and attention to detail. Schön's bike is an example, but so is work by builders like Tomii. "He's been doing some absolutely beautiful and romantic touches on things like top caps. They look like jewelry you could wear."

Specialized probably isn't making a disco ball circus bike. But the craftsmanship, aesthetic, and range in today's handmade scene bodes well for the cycling industry. Big manufacturers mostly design within a fairly limited box. Schön "reached outside the box," Schwinn says. "She reminded us of the possibilities of what a bike is."

* * *

SCHÖN ONCE TOLD AN INTERVIEWER THAT, AS A FEMALE builder, "You have to work twice as hard to get the same level of respect as everyone else." Over Zoom, I tell her I relate with this feeling as a woman in outdoor journalism. Actually, as a woman.

"I really do feel you have to be excellent to be considered competent," she agrees. "But it's also a double-edged sword because you have no choice but to become really good."

Whether for this reason or not, one cannot argue with Schön's qualifications. She's a certi-

fied welder and machinist with a background in more than just bicycles. She's apprenticed under builders with nearly opposing styles: Brodie, who once built for Rocky Mountain Bicycles and takes a production-oriented approach, and Yamaguchi, who eschewed power tools when making track bikes for Keirin racers and the U.S. National Team. In 2022, she began teaching framebuilding. Now she's machining her own components, something only a fraction of small builders can do.

"If I were to write a recipe for how to be a good framebuilder, she'd tick every box," Schwinn says.

Schön tells me it's her personality to constantly learn new skills and challenge herself. And if she didn't do that, you probably wouldn't know her name. If this bike is a stunt—which it is—it's a stunt not even half her counterparts could pull off. It's the product of a craftsman who's had to be twice as good.

The world changes slowly. On one online framebuilding forum, a commenter reduced the bike to "gluing mirror shards onto four pieces of tubing" and called it "a symptom of a sick industry." Replies swiftly called him out for the comments.

Schön no longer takes thoughtless feedback like that seriously. Yet she still wonders: If the bike was made by a man, an industry darling, would the commenter say that? She's seen—we've all seen—plenty of work done by the usual players that's just-fine, does nothing surprising, and comes nowhere close to pristine. Yet it passes or is even celebrated. It can drive you crazy. It can break your heart.

"It's always there. It never goes away," Schön says. "And your options are, you either figure out how to deal with it and let it become noise. Or it's gonna ruin your life," she laughs.

It's not a real choice. Obviously, we schlep on. We push ourselves harder. We earn a new certification. We hone a new skill. We become extremely dialed.

So do the things we make.

"When you bring people in," Schön said of her bike, "you have to impress them with something."

Maybe that's what's in it for everyone else with all this inclusivity stuff. Less sameness, more excellence. Less mediocrity, more sparkle. It's not fair that some people have to be twice as good to get the same, but maybe their struggle is your gain. They hone and they push and the bar slowly rises. You get a product that's better made and less like anything else you've seen.

You probably will never ride a disco-ball-inspired double unicycle. Or a bike with a top cap you could wear like jewelry. But maybe one day you will ride a bike that is a little more surprising, a little more delightful, a little more excellent. Because bicycles like the disco ball bike exist. ***B***

EMPIRE STATE
TRAIL

BIKEPACKI AMERIC

Commerc
Rd
Ransom Rd
44
55
to Poughkeepsie

NG
A’S LONGEST

mercial Av
DRIVE WAY
CROSSING
WRS DRT
44

T MULTIUSE

BY SEBASTIAN MODAK

PHOTOGRAPHY BY
BRYAN BANDUCCI

Johnson
Park

TRAIL NETWORK

Even the slightest rain can sound thunderous inside a tent—and this was not slight rain. It came down in buckets, just as my partner Maggie and I were settling into our sleeping bags. I worried whether the barely-two-person tent would withstand a deluge like this and what the protocol was should lightning strike. And then lightning struck.

We talked about what to do. Maggie pulled up some information on her phone and was soon crouching on one foot, to avoid creating a circuit, she said with confidence. She counted the seconds between each flash and rumble out loud to gauge the storm's proximity to us. I was mostly thinking of just how scant our escape options were. Our only way out was our drenched bicycles, resting against a soggy pine tree outside the tent. We took turns proposing different plans: spend the night in the campsite bathrooms, ride to the nearest motel, call the cops. We settled on hoping for the best. I fell asleep amid spiraling thoughts of dread: first night in, and this bike trip was already feeling like a mistake.

I woke up to the sound of birdsong and gentle raindrops, one beckoning me out of my sleeping bag, the other making a convincing argument to burrow deeper into it. But multiday bike touring, I would come to learn by the end of a 10-day journey across New York State's Empire State Trail, is all about convincing yourself to do things you might not feel like doing—ride another dozen miles to the next town because it's either that or a soulless highway motel, eat yet another granola bar because you didn't plan lunch properly, wake up early to beat the hottest hours of the day—only to be thankful, eventually, that you did them.

Under a canopy of drizzle, Maggie and I emerged from our tent and went about a set of tasks that would soon become routine: We boiled water on our tiny camp stove for coffee and tea, broke down our sopping tent, repacked our panniers, and triple-checked that we left nothing behind. We were exhausted—a bad sign considering this was Day Two. But it was understandable, given how much we'd already experienced.

Starting in Buffalo, we'd decided to take a 65-mile pre-trip detour, cycling to Niagara Falls before looping back to start our real journey on the Empire State Trail that would take us all the way to New York City. We had already ridden through verdant farmland and industrial blight, had meandering conversations with strangers, and contended with the elements. A douchebag in a cheap sports car had almost run us off the road, but a bike shop mechanic at Campus WheelWorks in Buffalo had fixed my moody mechanical disc brakes on our way out of town and refused payment after he saw our panniers. We were the third bike tourers who had come through that week, he told us, but the first to have chosen to go west—to the falls—before heading east. He seemed to like that.

The morning after the storm, we caught our first glimpse of the Erie Canalway Trail, the western section of the Empire State Trail, which runs 360 miles from the shores of Lake Erie in Buffalo to the Hudson River in Albany. As far as we could see, we were the only people on this section. A finely ground gravel path, compacted by the rain, ran along the canal's edge, straight and flat. A blanket of fog cloaked the waterway in an eerie silence. We stopped for a minute to take it in. Amid the quiet, I struggled to imagine the canal as the artery of industry it once had been. It was a long way yet to New York City.

* * *

ON DECEMBER 31, 2020, NEW YORK'S then-governor Andrew Cuomo announced the completion of the Empire State Trail, a 750-mile bike route, 75 percent of which is on car-free paths. The trail runs from Battery Park on the southern tip of Manhattan, up through the Hudson Valley and the Adirondacks to the border with Canada. Another section runs from Albany, all along the Erie Canal, to Buffalo. In all, it's the largest multiuse trail network in the country.

While most sections existed before the establishment of the Empire State Trail, it took roughly four years—and about $200 million—to link them into a continuous network, a process that involved stakeholders ranging from individual municipalities to community volunteer groups, to the state's parks department. "[The Empire State Trail is] easily 50 percent of my job now," says Christopher Morris, the statewide trails program planner for New York State Parks, Recreation, and Historic Preservation. The trail isn't overseen by a single entity; rather, it's a kind of amorphous commonwealth of invested parties, each looking after their own section in favor of this greater mission. A major part of Morris's job involves getting the word out, he says. He often gets emails from would-be travelers, from both the U.S. and abroad, looking for tips on how to navigate the trail. "When you really see this kind of investment make a difference, it's rewarding," he says. "It makes you feel good about your job."

It's understandable if you missed this bit of nerdy infrastructure news when the trail system opened. December 2020 was, up until that point, the deadliest month of the COVID-19 pandemic in the United States. Over the preceding eight months, I'd holed away in a one-bedroom apartment in Manhattan, overwhelmed by a sense that the world I'd known and loved had ended. I'd spent the entirety of the previous year hopping week by week from destination to destination as The 52 Places Traveler for the *New York Times*, so the abrupt transition to total stasis left me feeling helpless—not to mention jobless. I welcomed the Empire State Trail news, which I heard about from hours of scrolling through Reddit looking for something—anything—to bring me out of my apartment and into the world again. Around four years earlier, I had splurged on a Trek CrossRip, a jack-of-all-trades, gravel-ish bike with an aluminum frame, after a lifetime of secondhand clunkers. Over time, I had made little upgrades—a Brooks saddle, handlebar tape that didn't bleed dye onto my palms, bombproof Schwalbe tires to withstand New York City, where the streets are paved with glass. In the darkest days of the pandemic, that bike became my ticket out.

I rode whenever I could—through the empty streets of the city, the

usual din of life being lived replaced by the constant wail of sirens; up and down the Hudson River Greenway on Manhattan's West Side, itself part of the Empire State Trail. At around the same time I'd sprung for the Trek, Maggie had bought a Specialized Dolce, an aluminum all-rounder with rim brakes and what the company calls "Women's Endurance Geometry." She also fell in love with Brooks's leather saddles and added in-line brake levers for extra safety. Together, we ventured farther afield. We followed the Empire State Trail up through the succession of rail trails in the Hudson Valley, veering off it to visit a friend in the Catskills. In the summer of 2021, I rented a car and drove my bike 275 miles up to Lake Champlain, where I explored the network's most northerly sections through the Adirondacks, where the "trail" often is just a lane painted onto the side of a road—some of the 25 percent that isn't car-free. I took locals' advice to deviate from the main roads onto quieter country lanes, but I also found the rumble of logging trucks and tourist campervans whizzing by me oddly comforting, for it signaled a return to some kind of normalcy.

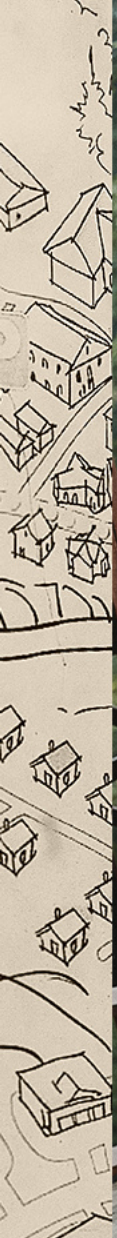
Spending so much time in transit for work has made home a moving target to me, often just out of reach and always out of focus. The bicycle, a tool invented to traverse distances efficiently, helped me see what was right in front of me.

- - - - - - - - -

IN THE EARLY MONTHS OF 2023, I started to sketch out a trip I hoped would feel like a culmination of all my backyard wanderings around New York. Travel has always been a shortcut to adventure to me, and, because of that, I've often shorthanded adventure as requiring distance. I wondered if I could tap into the same thrills, all without ever stepping foot on a jet plane.

AFTER STOPPING FOR BREAKFAST AT ROUGH DRAFT IN KINGSTON, NEW YORK, SEBASTIAN MODAK PACKS HIS HANDLEBAR BAG AND PREPARES FOR A WET DAY ON THE EMPIRE STATE TRAIL.

Rough Draft
bar & books
NO PARKING HERE TO CORNER
ACADEMY
THE STORY OF HISTORIC KINGSTON THEN & NOW
COFFEE, BOOKS BEER
OPEN TIL 8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LEFT: MODAK MAKES ONE OF SEVERAL BRIDGE CROSSINGS ALONG THE EMPIRE STATE. RIGHT: AS RIDERS INCH TOWARD NEW YORK CITY, TRANQUIL FARMLAND GIVES WAY TO BUSTLING TOWNS AND CITIES.

After a 10-hour train ride from New York City to Buffalo, I'd ride two main sections of the Empire State Trail—the west-to-east Erie Canal Trailway and the chain of rail trails and backroads running south from Albany back to my Harlem apartment—some 550 miles in all. Burdened by corporate vacation policies, Maggie decided she'd ride the Erie Canal section to Albany with me, then hop on the train home. In the months leading up to the trip, I pored over guides and online forums, of which there are many, building out a plan that involved a mix of camping and staying at bed-and-breakfasts in the towns along the way. Veterans of the trail warned of heavily trafficked sections of road around Kingston in the Hudson Valley and of the mosquitoes that swarmed the campsites at the various lock stations of the Erie Canal. Insiders cautioned against underestimating the coma-inducing qualities of a Rochester "garbage plate," a bucketload of ground meat smothered in a fridge-tray's worth of condiments. I took fastidious notes and drew up packing lists, weighing my panniers until I got to a weight I felt comfortable with. I plotted out days on the trail that would run us an average mileage of around 60, with a few "rest days" in the 30s baked in.

Seasoned bikepackers and bike tourers may find this all a little overdramatic. But having really only fallen hard for cycling in the last few years, I still don't understand many things: a bike's head-tube angle and trail; heart-rate zones and watts. But I do know travel. I know that so many of the clichés are true: that the best travel moments often appear out of the haze of the unexpected; that the journey can mean much more than the destination; that risk almost always reaps rewards; that who you travel with is often more important than where you go; that everywhere, no matter how seemingly mundane or obscure, has a little bit of magic waiting to reveal itself, if you just let it.

When it opened in 1825, the Erie Canal was the longest artificial waterway in North America and, in how it opened up the interior of

RECOMMENDED STOPS

COUNTRY STORE
SUMMER HRS
THUR 7-4
FRI 7-6
SAT & SUN 8-6

Courtesy Sebastian Modak

HUNGRY CHICKEN COUNTRY STORE → Is this farm store near the Mohawk River home to the best breakfast sandwich in the country? When you've been riding for days, and you pull in just in time for a late breakfast, it sure feels like it. (On weekends, call ahead to order your breakfast sandwiches, because they're that popular.)

THE COFFEE POT CAFE, MEDINA → The town, one of the most thriving stops along the Erie Canal, is home to this adorable cafe that provided the perfect pick-me-up on a tough, hot day. A giant map of the world decorated the wall, with pins from where travelers (mostly bike tourers, I was told) had come in from. One of the proprietors was wearing full chef whites, hat and all.

THE AVIARY, KINDERHOOK → After more than a week of hefty sandwiches and meat-and-potatoes country fare, I indulged the bougier ends of my taste at this gorgeously appointed restaurant. The shape-shifting menu leans heavily on Southeast Asian flavors, as evidenced by a refreshing papaya salad and spaghetti alle vongole remixed by using ramen noodles and salted egg yolk.

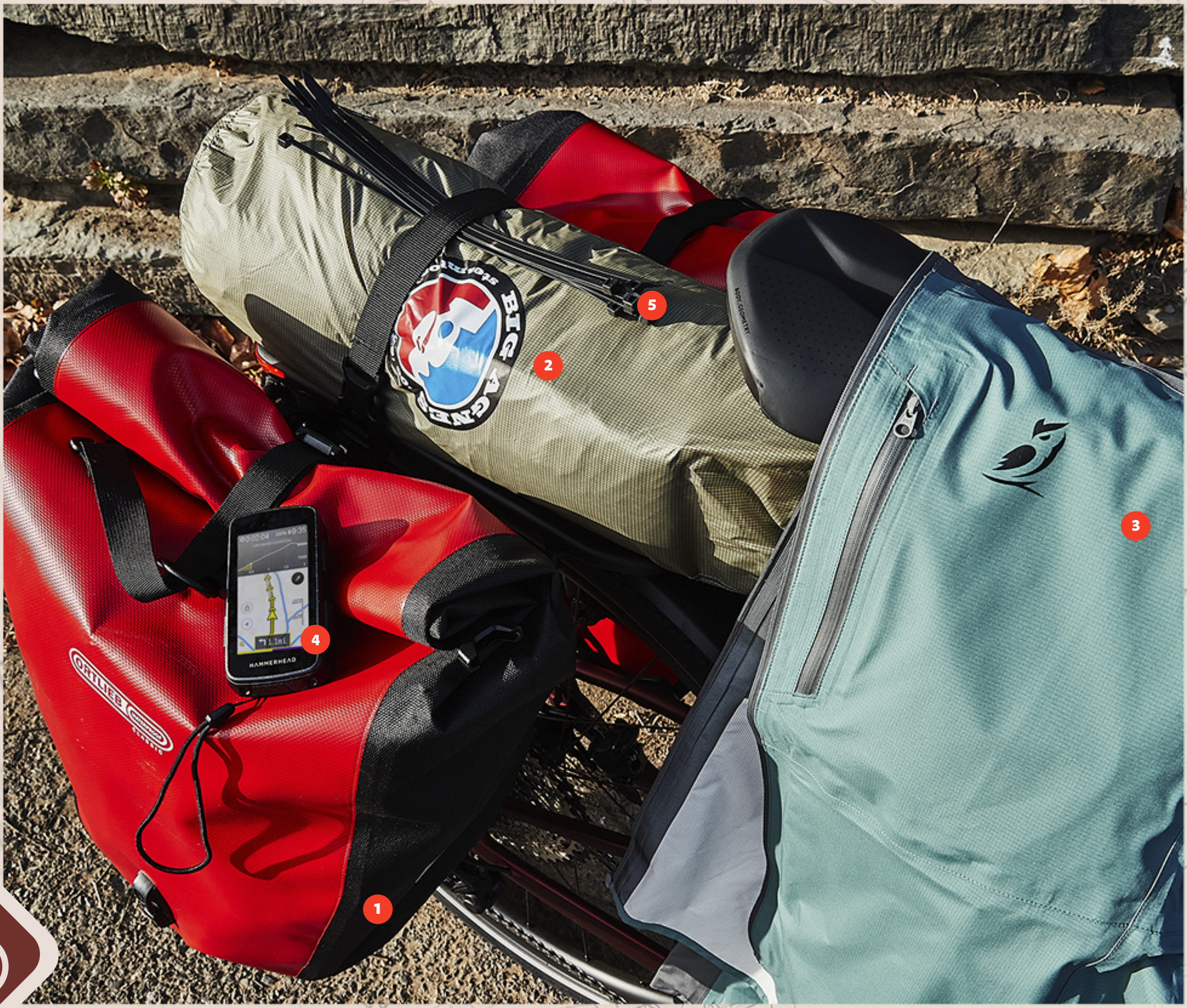
MICHAEL'S DINER, FULTONVILLE → One of the great draws of riding the Empire State Trail is how it brings you into the heart of small communities you might never interact with otherwise. This diner feels like the heart of one such community, where the namesake owner is generous with both portions and sarcasm.

THE TOWN OF PITTSFORD → This pleasant village on the outskirts of Rochester is a worthwhile lunch stop, with a cluster of open-air restaurants along the waterfront. We settled on crepes, but other options included a brewery, a pizzeria, and a Mediterranean restaurant.

HUDSON VALLEY
RAIL TRAIL

HUDSON VALLEY
RAIL TRAIL
EMPIRE STATE
TRAIL

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: OLD TRAIN CARS ARE SCATTERED ALONG THE HUDSON VALLEY RAIL TRAIL. THE EMPIRE STATE TRAIL AND THE HUDSON VALLEY RAIL TRAIL OVERLAP FOR ABOUT 7 MILES. MODAK LUBES HIS GRIMY CHAIN AFTER A WET START TO THE DAY.



Trevor Raab

SEBASTIAN'S MUST-HAVE GEAR

1 / ORTLIEB BACK-ROLLER PANNIERS ➔ Every Google search spiraled back to these workhorses from the German company Ortlieb. These packs are easy to use, remarkably durable, and waterproof (I once had one fall into a rushing stream, and everything came out dry). They're the gold standard, in my book.

2 / BIG AGNES COPPER SPUR HV UL2 ULTRALIGHT TENT ➔ This measly 3-pound (and change) tent stashes away into a small package and can withstand most weather you encounter. Big Agnes released a bikepacking version after my purchase, with poles that break down into shorter lengths and a handlebar bag, but I plan to keep using what I've got until it fails me.

3 / OUTDOOR VITALS TUSHAR RAIN JACKET ➔ A lot of rain jackets and shells—while effectively keeping water out—leave me utterly drenched in sweat if I'm pedaling through a downpour, thus defeating the purpose. This extremely lightweight jacket has become my go-to for cycling. It keeps my core dry enough without making me overheat—and, for those nice blue-sky days, it packs away into just about any space.

4 / HAMMERHEAD KAROO GPS COMPUTER ➔ After dealing with one too many dead-phone situations (or worse) while cycling in the woods, I finally made the switch to using a bike computer for navigation. Karoo makes it easy to customize your display and has an intuitive user interface for inputting routes.

5 / ZIP TIES & CABLE TIES ➔ A bike tourer I met once told me he never goes on a trip without them. After fixing broken bags, loose cables, and even a fully loaded rack with cable ties—at least for long enough to get to the nearest bike shop—I, too, am a card-carrying member of the Church of Zip Ties.

the country to enterprising East Coasters, it was an embodiment of a pioneer mindset that saw a burgeoning country shape the land to its will and expand farther west. While it wouldn't take long for the railway to replace canal barges as the go-to freight hauler, the political will and sheer toil that went into the canal's construction would be a precursor to the hyper-capitalist nation emerging in the following centuries. "In time, this skinny ditch in upstate New York would demonstrate that trade and commerce are keys to the expansion of prosperity and freedom itself," writes the historian Peter L. Bernstein in his 2005 history of the canal, *The Wedding of the Waters*.

Many of the settlements along the canal aren't thriving like they were when this was a major thoroughfare of trade. Once tracing a path between vibrant industrial hubs, the waterway now closely mirrors the contours of the Rust Belt. Just as the grandeur of Victorian mansions points to what was, so do empty streets and faded "For Rent" signs on empty storefronts.

One such town, Brockport, is at least partially buoyed by the state university campus—or so I was told by Valerie Ciciotti, who runs Park Ave B&B in a painstakingly restored 1851 mansion that we stayed in. Graduation is the busiest time, she says, but bike tourists like us are becoming more common every summer. As we rolled out of Brockport the next morning, I wondered—not for the last time—whether a steady influx of tired, hungry cyclists could be enough to keep towns along the canal alive. (When I caught up with Ciciotti recently, she said the trail was already making a difference—the village government has become more directly involved with tourism, including designating Brockport an official Empire State Trail Town.)

WE SPENT THE NEXT WEEK ON the Erie Canal in a kind of meditative rhythm that only comes from long trips, drifting in and out of conversations with each other, keeping count of kingfishers flitting along the water, and gasping when a heron swallowed a fish whole.

Outside Fairport, the skies turned black and dumped rain on us until we were laughing at the absurdity of trying to cycle through mud so dense it made our tires seize. Bystanders, wise enough to take shelter, cheered us on as we rode. We stopped under an awning and pried mud from our chains with our fingers. When the rain showed no sign of stopping, we just kept going—pulled along by the promise of a hot shower and a cold beer. We rode through sheets of rain until water poured out of our shoes. Once the deluge slowed, we tied wet clothes to our bikes. We looked like sailboats rolling down the trail.

One night, we camped at one of the locks along the trail, where boats are lifted to account for elevation changes in the ground. (Cyclists can camp at certain locks for free but are encouraged to call the lockkeeper

BELOW: ON A HUMID MORNING TOWARD THE END OF HIS TRIP, MODAK STOPS FOR A GATORADE AND SNICKERS BAR AT A GAS STATION IN YORKTOWN HEIGHTS, NEW YORK.

JUUL
NO SMOKING
NO
WESTCHESTER LOCK & ALARM
SWEET TEA
REAL BREWED TE
PUR
LEAF
pepsi
TREK
AQUAFINA

Commerce
Me H.... Rd
Gate
Haviland Rd
44
55
to Poughkeepsie

IF NOVELTY IS WHAT DRIVES OUR TRAVEL DECISIONS, IT WAS RAPIDLY BECOMING CLEAR TO ME THAT

I DIDN'T ALWAYS NEED TO FLING MYSELF HALFWAY AROUND THE WORLD TO FIND IT.

LEFT: A VIEW FROM THE HUDSON BRIDGE BETWEEN NEW PALTZ AND POUGHKEEPSIE, NEW YORK. RIGHT: THE WELL-WORN BROOKS SADDLE ON MODAK'S TREK TOURING BIKE.

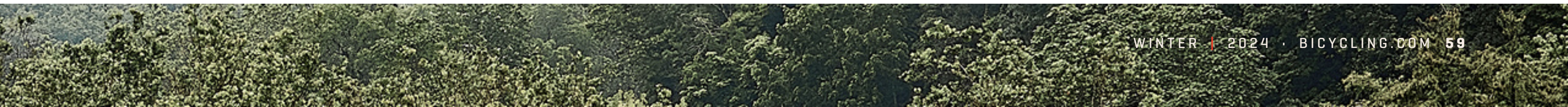
ahead of time as a courtesy.) As the light faded and the mosquitoes emerged, I spoke to a pair of retirees on a boat who were following the same path as so many goods-bearing barges once did—from the Great Lakes to the Hudson and the sea. We woke up in the middle of the night to the infernal shrieks of nearby foxes. The following morning, we rode into Utica for breakfast at Golden's diner, itself a throwback, where one man behind a counter flipped eggs and pointed to the self-service coffee station while bebop played from tinny speakers.

For our last night on the canal, we stayed in the Amsterdam Castle, which looms over the tiny town of Amsterdam like a tyrant's keep. A bizarre manifestation of some sort of Arthurian fantasy, the hotel features suits of armor in the lobby and velvet bedding in the rooms. New York State truly contains multitudes.

I thought about all the many things I'd seen and done in my travels to far-flung places—witnessing a solar eclipse in Chile, kayaking alongside humpbacks in Antarctica, hiking through prehistoric rainforests in New Zealand. If novelty is what drives our travel decisions, it was rapidly becoming clear to me that I didn't always need to fling myself halfway around the world to find it.

* * *

BECAUSE THE EMPIRE STATE TRAIL IS mostly a consolidation of existing paths and an effort to fill the gaps between them—and because of the vast distances the network covers—the character of the trail changes the farther along it you ride. I noticed this as soon as I said goodbye to Maggie in Albany at the eastern terminus of the Erie Canal and turned south on the first of a number of rail trails that would take me back



and Rd
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Hudson River
USE SIDEWALK
NYC GREENWAY
EMPIRE STATE TRAIL
East Coast Greenway
TOW AWAY ZONE
NO PARKING
ROAD REPAIR
TUESDAY

RIDING INTO FORT WASHINGTON PARK ON THE HUDSON RIVER GREENWAY BRIDGE AT THE TOP OF MANHATTAN. RIGHT: THE EMPIRE STATE TRAIL IS MOSTLY A CONSOLIDATION OF EXISTING PATHS, A REASON VARIOUS TRAILS OVERLAP.

to New York City over the next three days. With the canal no longer a constant companion, I found myself instead passing through bucolic suburbs, open farmland, and, occasionally, dense sections of forest. Riding alone after days with someone else was an adjustment, too. I found, just a few hours after turning south, I was talking to myself—making observations about the lack of shade and the odd, ashy taste in my mouth from forest fire smoke drifting south from Canada. It made for tough riding—and I took much more frequent rest stops.

When planning my trip, I knew I'd pass through major regional hubs like Hudson and Kingston. But I also wanted to experience corners of the state I hadn't seen before, and I chose my stops for the night with that in mind. That's how I ended up veering a mile off the trail into the storybook village of Kinderhook. I checked into the luxurious Old Dutch Inn, a new hotel housed in a modernized 19th-century building with views of the village square. It had only just opened a few weeks prior. The co-owner, Jennifer Ose-MacDonald, showed no trepidation when she welcomed my mud-streaked, sweat-drenched self into her immaculate establishment, where snow-white linens hung from the windows. Knowing I was one of the first of what she hoped to be many bike-traveler guests, she asked me for advice on bike racks. I told her that though the exact model of bike rack wasn't that important, alas, a lot of cyclists might not be as comfortable locking up their bikes outside overnight as I was. (Ose-MacDonald says she has since carved out space for indoor bike storage and has added a trove of tools for cycling guests.)

Ose-Macdonald's partner, Jake Samascott, runs a much-visited orchard and farm shop in town but is also the president of the Columbia Friends of the Electric Trail, an organization of volunteers who maintain the section of trail that passes through Columbia County, mowing and trimming the greenery around the path. For years it was an unused, overgrown corridor through which power lines ran. More than a thoroughfare for bike tourists like me, the trail is a community asset, Samascott says. "I have three little girls who wanted to learn to ride bikes—I want them riding on a trail and not on the road."

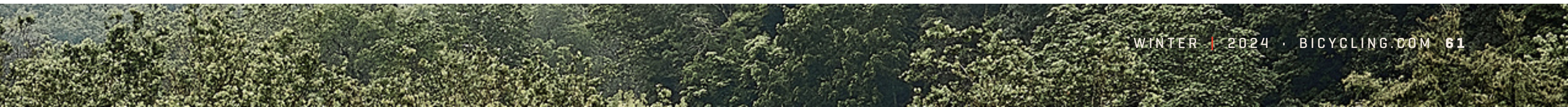
I saw how these paths build community throughout my trip but especially on the rail trails that run one into another through the Hudson Valley until they end in Van Cortlandt Park in the Bronx. Travelers like me were few and far between, but I passed dozens of families out on bikes, joggers with their dogs, even summer-school groups. Several, seeing my bags, and the level of grime on my face and body, would offer a thumbs-up or shout, "You're almost there," though they didn't know where I was going.

New York State isn't all smooth-rolling. Idyllic sections of tree-shaded gravel paths on rail trails are broken up by hilly roads and, at one point around Kingston, a traffic-snarled bridge. Unlike the Erie Canal section, campsites along the Albany-NYC axis of the trail are largely nonexistent, which means budgeting for hotels, and that can be pricey, especially during the summer high season. The penultimate stretch of trail, leading to the town of Brewster, inches steadily uphill for at least 15 miles, which, after more than a week of long days, felt like I was conquering the Dolomites. Arriving in Brewster—still about 50 miles from the northern edge of New York City—I found none of the charming, independent B&Bs or idyllic campsites I had depended so much on during my trip. I could have opted to make a break for it and ride a century straight from the Poughkeepsie area to the city on my last day, but I didn't have it in me. I bought a gas-station beer the size of my head, checked into a soulless Comfort Inn, and ordered a pizza.

OVER THE COURSE OF THE WHOLE TRIP, 11 days in all, I thought often about infrastructure and movement; about how much effort has gone into inventing new ways to travel, ever faster, ever cheaper, ever more efficient. By the time the Erie Canal was completed, the railroad was already ascendant. On large sections of the Hudson Valley's various rail trails, the rusted remains of iron rails sit, fossilized and inert. Alongside them, on the very beds of dirt where they once ran, the gravel is crisscrossed with bike-tire tracks and packed down with the footprints of millions of pedestrians.

I stopped often, to stretch, to photograph, to think. As it does when traveling on your own power, every mile felt like an achievement, no matter how repetitive and, at moments, no matter how difficult the actions were. Even while choking on smoke, with my legs burning and my bike making new and unfamiliar sounds (brake rub, it turned out), I found myself drawn onward by a sense of discovery—the feeling that I was getting a more solid picture of a concept that has eluded me for most of my life: home.

The closer I got to New York City, the more anything resembling silence was replaced with the constant whir of nearby interstates. Planes rumbled overhead. How much faster can we possibly go? What comes next in our constant hunt for peak efficiency? And what will we do with all that extra free time, anyway? The bike and all the places it can take me beckon. ***B***

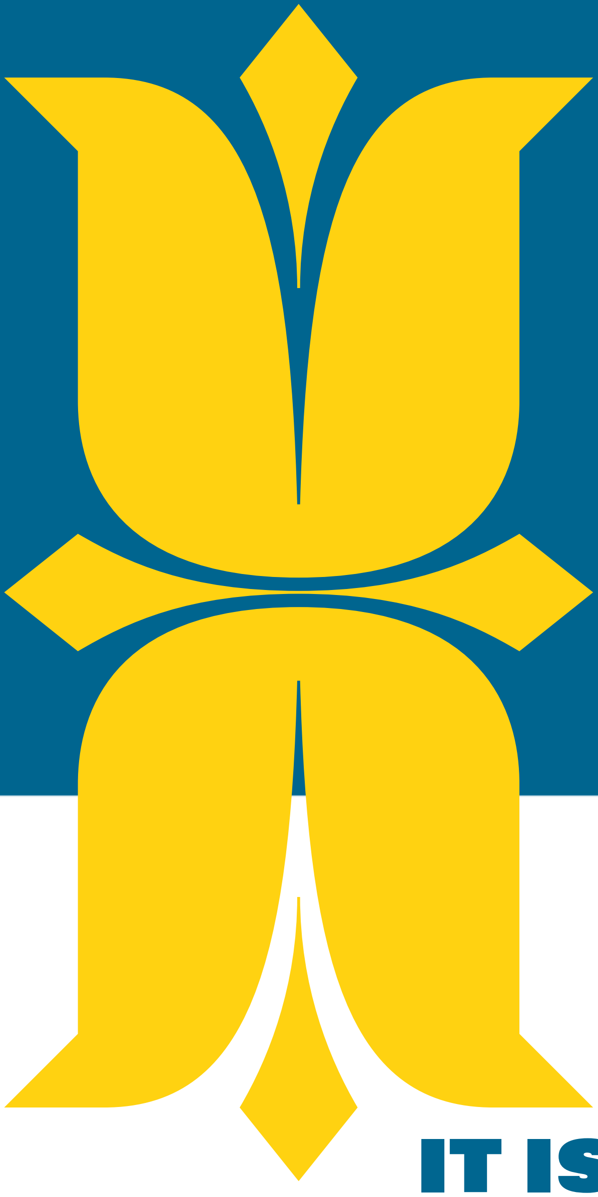


UNLOCK THE SECRETS OF CYCLING'S SUPER AGERS

MEET THE SWEDISH SENIORS WHO PROVE YOU'RE NEVER TOO OLD TO RIDE HARD.

BY BILL DONAHUE

PHOTOGRAPHY BY MARTIN WICHARDT



IT IS AMAZING HOW FRAIL A CYCLIST CAN FEEL ON THE CUSP OF A RACE OR ANY ADVENTURE DESIGNED TO TEST THE SPIRIT.

It was mid-June and I was in Sweden, on the shore of a glittering lake, Vättern, and about to take part in what's billed as the "world's largest bike challenge," the 196-mile Vätternrundan, along with 13,995 other riders, three-quarters of them Swedes. It was a delightfully cool Friday evening, and I should have been taking in the cobblestone streets and 13th-century architecture of Motala, the small city surrounding the starting line. I should have been casting my mind dreamily out onto the course. The race makes one clockwise loop around Vättern, Sweden's second-biggest lake, rolling through the long Swedish twilight as mist rises up from the water and the roads remain open to intermittent traffic.

But no, I was sullen and filled with dread, for my feet were hurting, along with the inside of my calves, and I was chastising myself for overtraining. Meanwhile, a larger question churned within me. Just a couple weeks after the Vätternrundan, I would be turning 60 and be blustering into old age with the unalloyed hunger of a 25-year-old. I am one of those pathetic AARP members who still endeavors to attack on the hills, and I wondered, "How does one gracefully segue into old age?"

I was in the right place to ask, for the Vätternrundan is an event that prides itself on welcoming all comers. There are, sure, a few lean phenoms who wail through the mostly flat course in just over seven hours. But the race, held annually, offers no prize money or even age-group awards, and the average finish time is about 13 and a half hours. At the starting line, where racers are released in groups of 50 or so at two-minute intervals from Friday night into the wee hours of Saturday morning, many cyclists show up in street clothes and sneakers. Rusty three-speeds are common in the peloton, and lots and lots of very old people take part.

At this year's race, 281 people over the age of 70 are starting. There is a guy, now 79, who has completed every Vätternrundan since its 1966 inception. Religiously, Stig Johansson rides in ripped jeans and clogs while piloting a heavy steel singlespeed manufactured in 1937. There are 17 other Swedes (16 men and one woman) participating in the event this year who have already completed 50 Vätternrundans.

In some ways, the longevity on display here is no surprise. Swedes have a long life expectancy—83 years as opposed to our 76—and 68 percent of all Swedes own a bike, as opposed to 37 percent of all Americans. In almost any Swedish village, there are dedicated car-free bike lanes where serene, unhelmeted elders pedal along with canes strapped to their bike racks. Meanwhile, exercise is very much a Swedish value—in so many small towns, the local culture is built around sports clubs where kids play soccer and ice hockey. And the habit of fitness persists into old age. Sixty-one percent of Swedish women over 70 are considered active, per WHO standards, as opposed to 35 percent in the U.S.

Ultraendurance events have a special place in Swedes' hearts—witness, for example, the Vasaloppet, a 56-mile cross-country ski race that draws 16,000 competitors to the frozen boglands of central Sweden each March. According to Daniel Svensson, associate professor of Sports Sciences at Malmö University, the fervor for such sadistic trials is historically rooted. "Sweden was built on activities like farming and forestry," Svensson explains. "In our information age, finishing the Vasaloppet or the Vätternrundan is one way of manifesting that you still have a capable body and can work for a long time, even if you're very old."

At the moment I'm awaiting a planned meeting with one of the oldest people ever to start the Vätternrundan. Anders Olsson, 89, is a retired engineer and part-time forester who's finished the race 46 times. When Olsson shows up, he seems loose-limbed, at ease. His long white hair is drawn into a makeshift ponytail, and his mustacheless white beard is trim. He speaks English precisely, his voice a murmur, and even though his start time is but 40 minutes away, he smiles and makes quiet self-deprecating jokes.

I admire his poise, so as we sit down on a bench, I ask a question that I hope might guide my race: "What's your strategy?"

"Well," Olsson says, pointing, "I will start up there and we will see if and when I come back. Hopefully I will enjoy the red poppies in the fields after Motala. They are extremely beautiful. And then south of Ödeshög, I expect to listen to the nightingale singing. There is usually a wonderful nightingale concert."

Eventually, he rises and I watch him push his bike, a 20-year-old Specialized Sirrus, up a grassy hill toward the line. An ace bandage wraps his left knee, but he moves forward with slow determination, like a soldier going to battle.

DAWN BREAKS DURING THE 2024 VÄTTERNRUNDAN. OPENER: STIG JOHANSSON AFTER THE FINISH IN 2024.

CYCLING IS A VERY GOOD FORM OF EXERCISE FOR OLDER people. A 2021 study found that cyclists are able to mitigate the "decline in walking performance" that comes with aging. Typically, people over 65 expend 15 to 20 percent more energy walking than their juniors over the same distances. A research team led by evolutionary biologist Daniel Aslan, at the University of Southern California, found that cyclists older than 65 used nearly the same amount of energy as younger adults when walking identical distances. Seniors who walk for exercise did not fare as well in the study.

Meanwhile, a 2022 experiment found that cyclists over 65 had better balance than their non-cycling counterparts—significant, given that Americans spend $50 billion annually addressing fall-related injuries to seniors. The American Heart Association recommends 150 to 300 minutes a week of moderate exercise. More than that may not be the ticket to longevity, though. A 2021 paper published in the *European Heart Journal* reported that male endurance athletes (those who exercise well over suggested guidelines) older than 40 are disproportionately plagued by plaque buildup in their coronary arteries as well as scarring of their heart muscles, and both afflictions likely increase their chance of having a heart attack. An earlier study, published in 2013, drills down further on senior athletes. A team of Norwegian researchers compared more than 500 men, aged 65 to 90, who took part in their country's most popular cross-country ski race, the 33-mile Birkebeinerrennet, and found that the skiers were about 30 percent more likely to experience atrial fibrillation (A-fib), a sometimes deadly cardiac arrhythmia, than their agemates in the general population. Older female endurance athletes are less studied, but a 2023 paper in the medical journal *BMC Geriatrics* says that "rudimentary reports" indicate that they, too, are at increased risk of suffering A-fib.

But most of us already intuited the physiological truths leaping out from the Norwegian study. When we get older, life asks us to slow down—to take naps, to leave the club before the band starts its second set. Meanwhile, a certain impulse inside nearly all of us yearns to burn on, hopeful that time will never lay its grim hand on our shoulder.

For me, the most intriguing questions are psychological: How do we reconcile with the dimming of our powers? And is it possible to find a happy medium between going for it and just smelling the flowers?

At the Vätternrundan, the stars are not the speedsters but rather those who seem to have cracked the riddle of aging. I witness this myself on Friday evening as the race's first wave rolls out of Motala amid loud, pumping rock music. At 7:32 p.m., the Swedish-language emcee goes ballistic, for suddenly there's a celebrity in our midst.

Stig Johansson, he of the clogs and jeans, pays no heed to assigned starting times—he's earned the right to show up in Motala on his own timetable. And he's here now, moving toward the starting line, wearing jeans with a gaping hole in

/FINISH

the knee. His long white hair flows freely, and when he laughs—this happens every 30 seconds or so—it comes out as a loud, toothy seal bark. His helmet, meanwhile, is topped by a giant, floppy red pompom. Called a *čuipi*, a pompom hat like this one is traditionally worn by Sweden's indigenous Sami people, and Stig's was made by a Sami craftsman. He says he wears it to attain a little visual razzle-dazzle, but the gesture is arguably a little tone-deaf and archaic.

When Stig rounds the corner at the base of the first hill, maybe 100 yards into the race, he grins and waves to the throng of spectators gathered there, and they volley back with a whoop of joy. A few miles later, in the quiet outside of town, he'll reach into his handlebar basket and switch on the cassette player nestled there. Over the next 24 hours, as he rolls along at a dawdling eight miles an hour, he'll play a medley of peppy, upbeat Swedish dance music from bands like Sven-Ingvars, founded in 1956 and still flourishing. For Swedes, the music carries the nostalgic, familiar magic that, say, early Elvis does for Americans.

■■■

MY OWN VÄTTERNRUNDAN BEGAN ON Saturday morning, at 5:06. Pre-race, I'd tenuously attached myself to a group of a dozen middle-aged Swedes who hoped, as I did, to finish in under 10 hours. But as we pacelined out of Motala and on through the poppy fields in the early morning coolness, my teammates kept giving me the universal "chill out" hand signal each time I floated to the front for a pull.

I was feeling strong. The pain in my feet had vanished (had it merely been anxiety?), and when a pack of about 40 riders began flying past us, I tuned into the whooshing sound they gave off as they cut through the wind. I recognized the aerodynamic opportunity glowing before me. "Nine hours!" I thought. "Nine, nine, nine!" I abandoned my team and joined the quick horde.

But there were problems. In Sweden—indeed, throughout Europe—cycling clubs can be tight social units. They drink cappuccino together three times a week. Outsiders can't just weave into their pacelines, and when I tried to do so, I was rebuffed. "This is a closed group," one guy said. "Ride behind us."

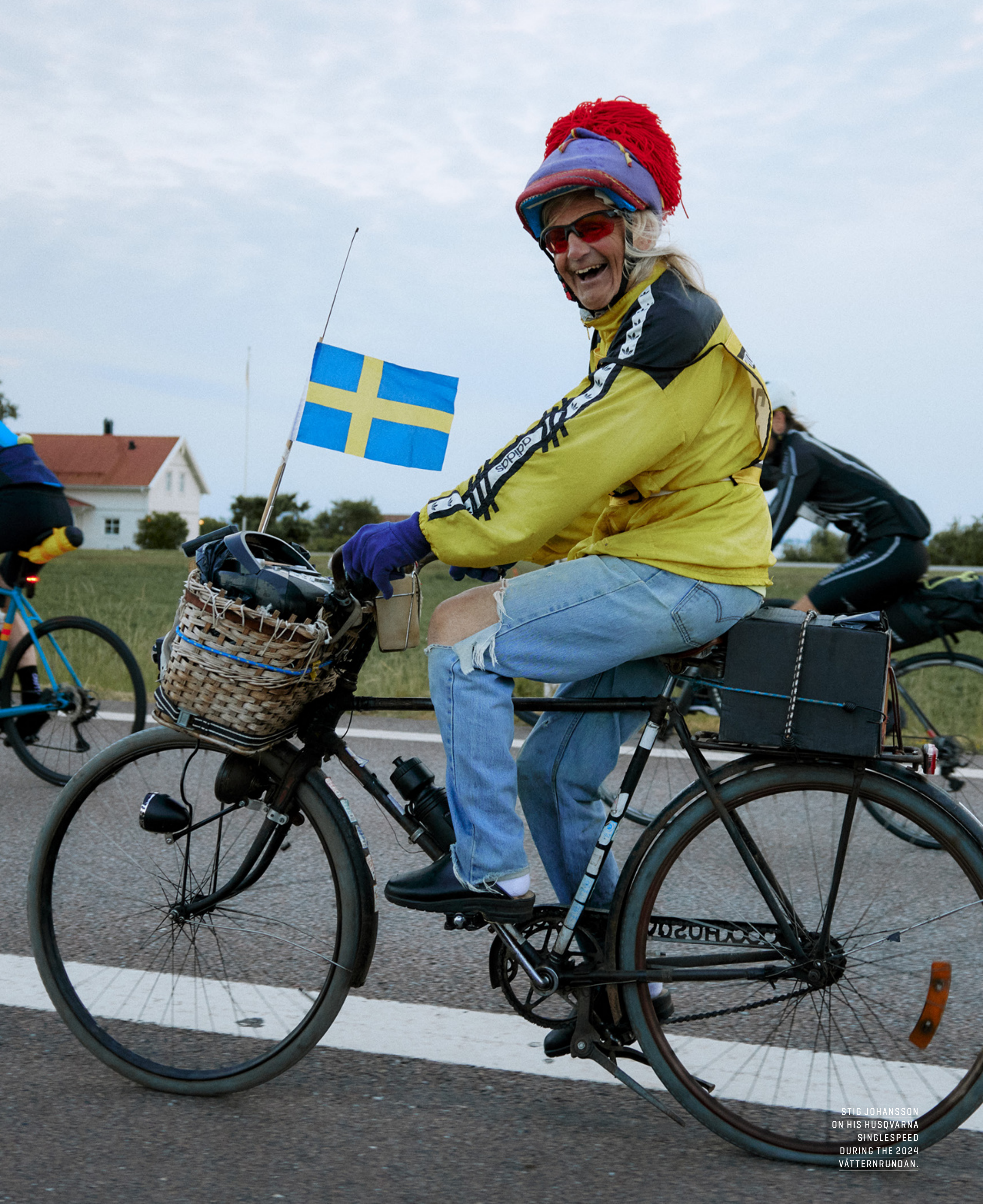
I did. But back there, it wasn't easy keeping contact with the group, and whenever a gap opened, requiring a sprint—well, I already told you how old I am.

For me, the Vätternrundan accrued a cruel pattern: I'd hang with a fast group for 20 or so miles. Then I'd find myself dropped and burning matches riding solo as I waited for another fast group to come up from behind and loft me along through the countryside.

Riding while old is an exercise in managing dwindling powers wisely, and I was not handling this task well. By the time I passed Stig, exactly 120 miles into the race, I was weary, but there were crowds of cheering fans in each little town. At rest stops, volunteers from local sports clubs ladled cool blueberry soup into paper cups and often wore matching T-shirts. The race is a fundraiser for such clubs, and its homey spirit buoyed me along. I finished in 9 hours, 40 minutes, satisfied but also aware, in the wake of my restless ramble,

SPECTATORS IN THE TOWN OF ÖDESHÖG CHEER RIDERS AS THEY PASS. OPPOSITE: ANDERS OLSSON, 89, AFTER THIS YEAR'S RACE.

THE MOST INTRIGUING QUESTIONS ARE PSYCHOLOGICAL: HOW DO WE RECONCILE WITH THE DIMMING OF OUR POWERS? IS IT POSSIBLE TO FIND A HAPPY MEDIUM BETWEEN GOING FOR IT AND JUST SMELLING THE FLOWERS?



STIG JOHANSSON ON HIS HUSQVARNA SINGLESPEED DURING THE 2024 VÄTTERNRUNDAN.

that I had absorbed no wisdom on aging. I would need to spend the next several days rambling along the shores of Lake Vättern on my bike and on buses and in a rental car, searching.

* * *

WHEN I FIRST CATCH SIGHT OF HIM, HE'S SHIRTLESS and hunched, feeding a piece of firewood into a loud, screeching 1940s-era band saw built before safety catches existed. Protective goggles, work gloves? Nah. Stig Johansson is old-school, and everything in his orbit betrays a staunch recalcitrance.

The crimson sting on his leathery forearms and back? As he sees it, no real man ever wears sunscreen. “Never ever!”

The blood-red color of the simple wooden house where has lived alone (save for one five-year stretch) since 1971?

“It's falu red. Traditional Swedish.”

And the clutter of junk surrounding his four storage sheds—the rusty buckets, the scraps of wood and concrete?

“You never know when you might need it. And there's always someone who wants to borrow something.”

When we sit down at an iron table in his yard to talk, I learn that Stig grew up poor, the fourth of nine children. There were so many kids, he says, in a rare moment of vulnerability, that “I didn't get a lot of time by myself with my parents.”

Stig's father, Karl, was a furniture maker, but the year Stig was born, his shop—and all the furniture in it—burned to ashes. Karl started work as a carpenter, but when his son was 9, Karl fell about 60 feet off a ladder, incurring a disabling injury that likely figured in his early death, which came when Stig was 15. At 16, Stig left school to work at a grocery store for eight cents an hour. At 17, he transferred to a furniture factory, and today, 62 years later, he is still a janitor there, one day a week.

Stig had a relationship once, with a woman 12 years his junior, but she had never found peace residing in his house. “Maybe I'm hard to live with,” he explains, ruminating on a breakup that occurred nearly 40 years ago. “I offered to buy her house in town. I offered to renovate and make this house larger, but she was really attached to her parents.” When the younger of the couple's two children was 14 days old, she moved out, and Stig says he did not have much involvement in his kids' upbringing.

His life is very social, though. For the past 40 years, Stig has coached teenage handball players and also served as the volunteer snow groomer at the local cross-country ski area. He may be part hermit, but interactions with others feed his soul, and this is evident even in his Vätternrundan strategy.

Deep in one of Stig's sheds, there's a Swedish-brand road bike, a '70s-era Crescent, with drop bars. Inflate the tires, oil the chain, and it'd be a pretty quick ride. But Stig prefers his upright Husqvarna, from the Swedish chainsaw company. “Riding that, you can talk to people,” he explains. “They can see you.” When he underscores this observation with his seal laugh, I think back on the moment I saw him, 120 miles in. All 20 or so riders in my group recognized him at once, and hailed him. He waved back brightly, even though he had, by then, been communing with fans for some 15 hours.

Stig has pushed past hard stuff—poverty, his dad's death, emotional distance from his kids—and found light. Muscle and grit are his survival tools, and I can certainly relate. At times I suffer, well, not clinical depression, but melancholia, and the best treatment I know involves going for a long ride. It's a tactic that works miracles when you're 50 or 60. But when you're 80?

FANS IN ONE OF THE SMALL TOWNS THAT DOT THE COURSE. OPPOSITE: BIRGITTA BERGLUND, 72, THE FIRST WOMAN TO FINISH 50 VÄTTERNRUNDANS.

VETERAN
JAG KÖR
MIN 52:A
Starttid: 19:30
VÄTTERNRUNDAN
HALLMAN

NILS-GUNNAR STEDT AT HOME IN LINGHEM, SWEDEN, WITH HIS DECADES OF VÄTTERUNDAN MEDALS AND MEMORABILIA.

Stig's got a Plan B, actually. "People tell me, 'When you can't ride anymore, you can go with me on the back of a tandem,'" he says.

Oh, to be a Swedish celebrity! As I leave Stig's house, I'm quite sure that no one was ever going to offer me a ride on a tandem. So next I seek out a more kindred spirit.

* * *

NILS-GUNNAR STEDT IS A FIGHTER. IN 2023, RACING the Vätternrundan at age 77, in sweltering 82-degree heat, he began to feel off-balance 130 miles in. "I thought there was something wrong with my inner ear," he says. Accustomed to pacelining with his longtime teammates at 18 miles per hour, he was now alone and weaving all over the road at 12 mph. Still, when a motorist offered him a ride, he declined and said he was weaving because his bike had a mechanical tic.

When he stopped for water at 160 miles, he fell to the ground. A single thought pulsed through his mind: "I gotta get up." He did, and he moved forward, he says, on "autopilot." After he finished, he never went to the doctor—he didn't want anyone to tell him to stop riding.

When I visit Nils, we start chatting in his office, where 50 Vätternrundan medals hang on the wall, along with a 2018 photo of a wizened Nils hunched over a time-trial bike, wearing a pointy helmet, racing in a 70-plus championship in Norway.

It is in this shrine to achievement that Nils has written four self-published books on the Vätternrundan, the latest a biography of (I'm quoting the title) "Living Legend" Lars-Åke Åkerman, a man so tough that, in 1998, he rode the Vätternrundan soon after he'd crashed his bike into a lump of concrete, shattering his left leg. Åkerman pedaled with one leg that year and finished in 21 hours.

In recent years, though, the legend has softened. In 2019, after completing 55 Vätternrundans, Åkerman's knee problems stopped his long ride. And this morning, one of Nils's longtime bike friends has just called to suggest that Nils, too, hang up his cleats. "At a certain point," the friend reasoned, "you need to consider your family."

Nils is dismissive of that advice. "I'm resilient," he tells me. "I have a resting pulse of 34." He's also developed a new Vätternrundan strategy. After careful consultation with his wife, he decided, in late 2023, that henceforth he would soft-pedal the Vätternrundan and make many stops. Amid cool temperatures at the 2024 Vätternrundan, the strategy worked. Nils finished in 14 hours, feeling fresh.

I ask him what if he just curbed his Vätternrundan expectations and ended his race in Hjo, a charming resort town 106 miles in?

For a second my question leaves him dumbstruck. "That won't happen," he says finally, in cool tones. "That would be meaningless."

Nils's stoicism has a deep context. In Swedish, there's a word that dates to the Viking era and, some believe, sums up the Swedish psyche. *Lagom* ostensibly means "just enough," as in not too hot, not too cold. But in the emotional realm, it describes a cool restraint and a quiet self-assurance so prevalent in Sweden that last year one Swedish town, Luleå, financed a formal "Säg hej!" campaign to get its residents to say hi to one another.

Stoicism is useful to any endurance athlete gutting their way to the finish line. But as a worldview, it's kind of stark, and my chat with Nils left me with an existential question: Is life simply a matter of tilting into the wind until the lights go out?

> **A CERTAIN IMPULSE INSIDE NEARLY ALL OF US YEARNS TO BURN ON, HOPEFUL THAT TIME WILL NEVER LAY ITS GRIM HAND ON OUR SHOULDER.**

* * *

AT THIS POINT, YOU'VE PROBABLY SURMISED THAT I brought my own stoic machismo to the Vätternrundan. Indeed, when I found myself toiling, for 15 miles or so, behind some guy whose seatpost bore a sticker reading "Boys Don't Cry," the phrase tumbled about in my skull like a credo; it was gasoline for my engine. And now I yearned to find a rider who answered life's hard challenges with nuanced humility. So it was an honor to meet the only woman ever to have completed 50 Vätternrundans.

A retired special education teacher who lives in Motala, a stone's throw from the Vätternrundan starting line, Birgitta Berglund is 72. Like Nils, she has a serious racing pedigree. She finished 12th in the 1970 Swedish national road-racing championships, and in 2017, at the age of 65, she pacelined the Vätternrundan in a solid 11 hours and 31 minutes.

Still, as we linger on the patio of her pleasant ranch home sipping coffee, Birgitta focuses not on her achievements but on the special delights of the Vätternrundan. She reminisces how, in 1972, she tucked into a lightning-fast pack of a hundred riders and they so dominated the road that the police sirened onto the scene and broke up the peloton. And she recalls the beauty of the 2021 race, which was held in September, thanks to COVID-19, and played out mostly in darkness. "You couldn't tell where you were on the lake," she says. "You couldn't see beyond the road lit up by your headlight. But everything was so calm."

Birgitta has ridden the Vätternrundan in three different gears—as a fast pacelining racer; as a slowpoke, in the company of her good friend, Stig Johansson, the clog man; and (most relevant here) as a moderately slow elder. "During the pandemic," she says, "I decided I wasn't supposed to go fast any longer. It's dangerous—you can crash."

Myself, I'd be inclined to regard the slowish races as dim flickers after a raging fire. But Birgitta speaks of her transition away from the peloton with neither dismay nor regret. "It wasn't hard to make the decision to slow down," she tells me. "Now I get to start early. I get to ride through the night."

Her equanimity is rooted in the steadiness of her life—and in family connections. She's ridden the Vätternrundan with both of her daughters, and she's already done a mountain bike race with her grandson, age 10. Her partner of 45 years isn't really a cyclist, but he built a special gate for their fence using her old bicycle. But there's also another force at work, Birgitta says, and it involves the Swedish adjective *segare*, which translates as "enduring" and hints at toughness and a slow persistence. "Women are more *segare* than men," she says. "They live longer, and when you walk around town here, you see that it's the old women that are taking care of the men, not vice versa."

I'm suddenly aware of how trapped I am in my own male egotism, and of how stubborn and brittle I could become in old age. I wonder: Is there a way for old guys to transcend such a fate? And then I think of how at peace I felt sitting on that bench with 89-year-old Anders Olsson, and I make one last appointment.

* * *

ON A SUNNY MORNING, I RIDE 15 MILES OR SO TO meet Anders. We put my bike on his rack and drive to the 125-acre forest that he maintains with his wife of 64 years. On the way, he tells me of his 20-hour Vätternrundan journey. At around 130 miles, he says, "I stopped and turned around to look at some yellow flowers. Near Hjo, I stopped for 10 minutes to appreciate the sunrise."

In 1980, Anders completed the Vätternrundan, then 297 kilometers long, in 9:42, but he says, "The only memory I have of that run is the back tire of the man in front of me. To chase minutes is a disaster. I am like Ferdinand," he says, referencing the titular character from the classic children's book by Munro Leaf about a bull who would prefer to smell flowers rather than fight. "I am only interested in sitting by a tree and looking at the flowers."

That's far from the whole story. In his professional life, Anders oversaw production for SKF, a ball-bearing manufacturer. His mind is labyrinthine and logical, and his approach to life is methodical. As we spend two hours tramping his steep forest, he turns the visit into a fine-grained tutorial on forest management; we dwell at length on a complex chart detailing when and how to thin the woods. "It takes 90 years to grow a tree," he says. "You have to be patient."

When we sit down in a tiny cabin for lunch, he eats his four gourmet mini-sandwiches one by one, moving from right to left.

It's arguable that Anders is quintessentially Swedish. In writing about his country in 1984, the eminent Swedish sociologist Hans L. Zetterberg noted: "In Sweden, rationalism has long dominated the climate of opinion… Political debate in Sweden deals primarily with technical questions."

For Anders, I think, rationalism is the firm soil that roots his life, allowing him to flourish and stay vibrant—to have fun, even. He tells me that two of his granddaughters recently appointed themselves his fashion advisors and put his hair in a ponytail. "They did it," he says, "after telling me, 'You look awful.' And now sometimes I pull the rubberband close to my head, so I look like [the comic book character] Tintin."

Cycling, Anders says, is one thing he doesn't plan. When he goes for a ride, he says, "I just make up the route as I go along. And I stop whenever I want."

Eventually, we pick our way downhill to his car. Then we stop at a remote forest intersection. Most people would have offered me a lift back to my hotel. But Anders doesn't bother. We both understand the delight that can come with starting a ride in an unfamiliar place.

As I start pedaling, I watch the wind bend the long grass by the roadside. Somewhere in the back of my mind, a small, riotous voice is going, "Next year, nine hours! The right group, the right training…"

But for now, I just listen to the whoosh of my wheels as I roll along through the Swedish countryside. ***B***

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C. Total Paid Distribution (Sum of 15b (1), (2), (3), and (4))	51,209	49,367
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G. Copies not Distributed	19,408	15,500
H. Total (Sum of 15f and g)	76,117	69,800
I. Percent Paid (15c divided by 15f times 100)	90.30%	90.92%
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A. Requested and Paid Electronic Copies	26,501	26,200
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HOW TO BE A RIDER

Zoe Biel, mechanic at Sun and Air bike shop in Brooklyn, loves the way being a rider immerses her in the environments around her. Here are some of her favorite things about being a rider.

THIS OR THAT

Bibs[1]	Jersey and Shorts
One Kind of Riding	All the Kinds of Riding
Mountains[2]	Crosswinds
Morning Ride	Afternoon Ride
Postride Coffee	Postride Beer[3]
Tubes	Tubeless[4]
Fix It Yourself	Take It to a Shop[5]
Short Hard Efforts	Long Steady Efforts
Saddle Bag[6]	Stuff Your Pockets
Flow Trail[7]	Tech Trail
Metal	Carbon
GPS[8]	Wing It
Gels	Bars
Tanwalls	Black Tires
Torque to Spec[9]	Tighten by Feel
Snickers	Haribo

Let me explain: (1) You can't beat the comfort. I used to get stomach cramps on long rides, and not having a waistband cutting me in half has solved that. (2) You can watch yourself make progress...and of course you get the reward of a view and a fun descent. (3) I like a midride coffee and a postride beer. Who says you have to choose! (4) I'm all about comfort, so I like that tubeless lets me keep a soft tire. (5) It's important to have a basic understanding of how your bike works. That being said, I love to bring my bike in for service. Support your local bike shop! (6) I like to use a feedbag-style thing—it keeps all of my "pocket items" right on hand, but also out of the way. (7) I love a flowy trail because it feels like riding a roller coaster. (8) On long rides, I use a GPS. If I'm riding around town, I prefer to look at the map ahead of time and try to get there without turn-by-turn. (9) For most things, you can torque by feel, especially if you're experienced. BUT, when you want to check the torque, you *really* want to check the torque, 'cause it's probably an expensive part.

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